

February 18 | Sunday of Lent

The primary purpose of Lent is to prepare us for the celebration of Jesus' death and Resurrection. The second purpose is to renew our baptismal promises of rejecting Satan and accepting Jesus as our Lord and Savior, allowing him to rule our lives. Both these aims demand purification of minds and hearts. The Church tries to achieve this goal by leading her children to metanoia or true "repentance," and by renewal of life through fasting, prayer, almsgiving, self-control and by corporal and spiritual works of charity. During Lent, we talk to God through personal, family and liturgical prayers and we listen to Him by meditative Bible reading. We serve the Lord by giving alms and we practice self-control through fasting. Since by Baptism we share the death and Resurrection of Jesus, today's readings refer to Baptism directly or indirectly.

The first reading tells us how man irrevocably broke the original covenant God had made with Adam and Eve, and how the merciful God selected Noah and his family to renew the covenant. Noah's rescue from the flood symbolizes how we are saved through the water of Baptism which cleanses us of sin and makes us one with Christ. Today's Responsorial Psalm (Ps 25) is an exquisite penitential prayer, humbly acknowledging human insufficiency and our radical dependence upon God, His mercy and His forgiveness. The psalmist lists some of God's Own characteristics that will shape the life of the forgiven penitent: truth, compassion, love, kindness, goodness, uprightness, humility, and justice.

In the second reading, St. Peter shows us how Noah's episode prefigured Baptism. He reminds us that, as Noah and his family were saved from the waters of the deluge, so we are saved through the waters of Baptism. Baptism is an outward sign of the New Covenant that God has made with His people. It makes us adopted children of God, heirs of Heaven, and temples of the Holy Spirit.

In the Gospel, we are told that Jesus faced and defeated the tempter by his forty days of prayer and penance in the desert immediately following his baptism. It also tells us how Jesus started preaching his Messianic mission: "The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent. Believe in the Gospel."

1) Let us make Lent a time of renewal of life by penance and prayer: Formerly the six weeks of Lent meant a time of severe penance as a way of purifying ourselves from our sinful habits and getting ready to celebrate the Paschal Mystery (the

passion, death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ), with a renewed commitment to follow Christ. Now the Church leaves the Lenten practice of penance to the good will and generosity of individual Christians. However, Lent should be a time for personal reflection on where we stand as Christians in accepting the Gospel challenges in thought, word and deed. It is also a time to assess our relationships with our family, friends, working colleagues, and other people with whom we come in contact, especially those of our parish. We should examine whether we are able to make any positive contribution to other people's lives and to eradicate the abuses which are part of our society.

2) Let us convert Lent into a time for spiritual growth and Christian maturity by: a) participating in the Mass each day, or at least a few days in the week; b) setting aside some part of our day for personal prayer; c) reading some Scripture, alone or, better still, with others; d) setting aside some money that we might spend on ourselves for meals, entertainment or clothes and giving it to an organization which takes care of the less fortunate in our society; e) abstaining from smoking or alcohol; f) receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation in Lent and participating in the "Stations of the Cross" on Fridays; g) visiting the sick and those in nursing homes, and doing some acts of charity, kindness and mercy every day in the Lent.

3) Let us use Lent as a time to fight daily against the evil within us and around us: Repenting and fighting against temptations and evil is a lifetime's task. Jesus did not overcome Satan in the wilderness; he achieved that only in his death. Lent reminds us that we have to take up the fight each day against the evil within us and around us, and never give up. Jesus has given the assurance that the Holy Spirit is with us, empowering us, so that final victory will be ours through Jesus Christ.