

Lent – our chance to return to the wilderness

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Lent 1b – Gen 9 8-17, Ps 25, 1 Pet 3 18-22, Mk 1 9-15

Last Tuesday evening – Shrove Tuesday – many traditional Christians would've finished clearing their pantries of sweets and delicacies, and, with the odd pancake or ten, eaten them up before Lent. We clear things out that might distract us from the focus of the fasting time. That focus is the simple truth that ultimately, we rely on God alone. Churches pare down too – no flowers; ornaments veiled, violet robes and hangings. With distractions out of the way, life is more austere and basic. Then that essential truth can come more easily into focus; we rely on God alone.

On Ash Wednesday, we thought about the way fasting from food has the effect of changing our experience of time. Our days are no longer partitioned into the spaces between meals, snacks and sleep. Instead, our days stretch out into an unfamiliar, trackless emptiness. Each day is then an obstacle-free space for God to find us.

We can achieve the same effect as fasting from food by fasting from overwork, from compulsive shopping, from over-consumption of news and media, from obsessive hobbies or passions (eg., worry). We can fast from speaking – inhabit the silence. Each is a chance to make obstacle-free space for God to find us.

For a long time now, the wider community has been bewildered by this sort of practice – if not downright hostile towards it. And that's understandable. Our 'quality of life' is conventionally measured by how much we consume and how full our social and working calendars are. Fasting from such things questions this measure of life, and many dislike such

indisputable standards being challenged.

Yet communities of faith – all faiths – have always valued fasting as a spiritual exercise. So what do we discover in this self-emptying process? What does it do for our spiritual health? There's more to it than that silly joke about banging your head against a wall – that it feels better when you stop? Today's collect prayer seems to me to point to what's happening – particularly the way it links the waters of the primordial flood with the waters of our baptism. It recognises that at the same time as these waters are bringing death, they're also germinating new life.

God of the new and eternal covenant, as the forty days of the great flood swept away the world's corruption and watered new beginnings of righteousness and life: grant to us, who are washed clean and born again in the saving flood of baptism, the wellspring of your grace, that your gift of new life may flourish once again; through Jesus Christ our Redeemer

The flood story is about washing away the wickedness and evil that had come to characterise humanity – *Gen 6.5 every inclination of the thoughts of [human] hearts was only evil continually.* Selfishness and disloyalty lay behind the human violence that so grieved God. The community on the Ark sheltered as much from those evils as they did from the waters of the flood.

And the story of Jesus' baptism sees him immediately after his baptism going to the people-free 'ark' of the wilderness – to be with wild creatures and angels, rather than humans – and await his call to mission.

Both the Ark community and Jesus emerged from a fast – a retreat from everyday life where God could come near them – where they could experience the utter dependence of all life on God alone. And when they finally left that wilderness, the Ark community and Jesus emerged in obedience to God's command

to restore life to Earth – to reaffirm the reign of God on Earth.

Lent is the time for the Church to rediscover, reaffirm and reinforce our basic values of love for God and neighbour. Lent is the time for the Church to remove ourselves from the prevailing climate of entitlement – and we've always been complicit in that – and re-equip ourselves for the self-emptying life that we see yet again modelled in Jesus today.

Jesus didn't go down to the river to take over from John the Baptist; he went down there just like everyone else to receive baptism. That is our model – rely on God alone, assume no entitlements, make obstacle-free space for God to find us.

Lent is our chance to return to the wilderness – to remove ourselves from all that numbs our spiritual senses – and wait for God – to wait upon God. Amen.