

Forty Desert Days

Mark 1: 12-15

On Ash Wednesday, we start Lent.
The flowers we used last year
on Palm Sunday
to applaud Jesus
were burnt to ashes the day before.

Our resolutions,
the ones we made
to be with Jesus
when we were waving
those branches last year,
had been burned
to ashes
long ago.

We put those ashes,
bitter,
salt,
and coarse
as they were,
on our foreheads
to show
that we had been unsuccessful,
to show
that we hope to do better,
and we started
our period of Lent,
we started to do penance;
and now
we appeal
to the forty days of Jesus
in the desert
to explain to ourselves
what we do.

It is right to appeal
to that period in the life of Jesus
on condition
that we really know
what he did
there in the desert
and on condition
that we are willing
to follow his example,
opening up to what the Spirit
worked out in Jesus during that period
of
his life.



It seems to me
that we often
very conveniently overlook
what happened to him.
We overlook
because like in so many spiritual affairs
we remain the children
we were long ago.

We are quite willing to do
some penance, we say.
Some of us decide
to drink less,
to smoke less,
to eat less,
to spend less,
to give to the poor,
to visit the sick,
to pray a bit more,

and all those resolutions
are excellent
and they all have something to do
with what Jesus did,
but it all remains
at a childlike level.

What Jesus underwent
was different.
Mark is short about it,
but he says
everything to be said.

Jesus was sent into the desert
by the Spirit,
by the Spirit of God.
That must have been
a terrific experience.
Just imagine
that you were taken up
by the Spirit of God!

That Spirit of God
chased him into the desert.
He did not go there,
he was driven;
and once in the desert
a fight developed,
a very fundamental fight,
a basic fight,



The way in which Mark indicates and characterizes that fight is outdated, it is a bit primitive. It does not appeal to us. Even the number 4 in 40 is an indication of what happened. Forty days, ten times four, four was the number that stood for *the earth* with its four basic elements
 earth,
 air,
 water, and
 fire.

There is the image of *the wild animals*, and all those elements and animals are described as beings ruled by Satan, the enemy, the adversary.

The fight is won by him.
 That is why, when coming out, he can proclaim the Good News from God: the time has come, the kingdom is close at hand, repent and believe.

It is at this point that we come in. Those words are addressed to us. We should not only look at his past in that desert; we should look at ourselves in the present and join Jesus



The prayer, “*Forty Desert Days*,” is by Joseph G. Donders, in *Beyond Jesus: Reflections on the Gospels*, Orbis Books, 1984. Used with permission.

in his cosmic struggle.

All this can be said in another way: it is in that desert, in that wilderness with those animals, with those elements –and the angels assisting him - that Jesus entered as an active participant in the history of humankind, humanity on its way to itself and to God.

We are invited during this Lent to enter into that history too, to participate in that fight. Amen.

Reflection Questions

- What does Fr. Donders mean by saying that Jesus became an “active participant” in the history of humankind after being in the desert?
- What “desert” do we have to enter and deal with to participate in human history? What demons do we have to contend with? How can we serve God when we have contended with these demons?
- Why is the invitation to this Lenten challenge so much more a challenge than giving up something for Lent or doing another discipline that only involves ourselves?
- Lent is the preparation for Easter, the holy day of Hope. How can the challenge Fr. Donders offers us better prepare us for the great day of Hope and Resurrection?