

Lenten Talk – Friday 19th February 2021

Come ring out our joy to the Lord;
Hail the God who saves us.

These are the first two lines of Psalm 94. The invitatory psalm recited at the beginning of each day by those who follow the Divine Office of the Church. I don't know if it's just me, but during the season of Lent, the psalm carries extra weight. For, as the psalm continues, you come to the part where it says,

O that today you would listen to his voice
Harden not your hearts as at Meribah
as on that day at Massah in the desert
when your fathers put me to the test
when they tried me, though they saw my work.

For forty years I was wearied of these people
and I said, "Their hearts are astray."
These people do not know my ways.
Then I took an oath in my anger
never shall they enter my rest.

These words recall the 40 years of wandering in the desert after the Exodus. And they echo the 40 days that our Lord spent in the desert being tempted by the devil, and so, the 40 days of Lent that we have begun have a very sacred heritage – and so too do all the temptations that Lent will bring.

Massah and Meribah, are words associated with Kadesh, the site in the Negev desert with two springs of water and usually identified as the place where Moses struck the rock and water flowed and where he had an argument with the Israelites.

Massah is the Hebrew word for "testing" and Meribah, the word for "quarrel."

The normal characteristics that accompany Lent are prayer, fasting and charity. And they, under normal circumstances will lead to testing and even to quarrels, perhaps with others or often only with ourselves.

Fasting. Giving something up for Lent. Why would I do this when, because of the pandemic and all its restrictions, we've already given up so much.

Acts of charity, almsgiving. When so many of us are struggling financially and are anxious about where our employment will come from – and when – should we now be concerned with giving to others? Does not charity begin at home?

And prayer. Our usual routine of prayer has been shattered, taken away and certainly tested.

Yet the Church still encourages us to take up Lent with renewed vigour. Is this right? But perhaps there is another way of looking at it, a different perspective to be found. Rather than Lent being an imposition, is it not something else entirely?

Let us go back to Psalm 94. The very first word is, “Come.” The psalm is called the invitatory psalm. Everything about Lent is, I would say, just that, an invitation and a personal invitation at that. This season above all is where our Eternal Father says, “Come.”

As our Lord, the eternal Word, goes into the desert to be tempted by the devil, he answers with texts from sacred Scripture. That is to say, the Word answers with the Word. At this time when the sacramental life of the Church is so heavily curtailed, perhaps an opportunity for us to re-immense ourselves in the words of Scripture.

“The Father of heaven gives you His eternal Word, and in that same Word He gives you at once His own life, His own being and His Godhead: for the Father and the Word are two Persons but one life and one being undivided. When the Father takes you into this light, that you may intellectually behold this light *in* this light in exactly the same way as He knows Himself and all things according to His paternal power in this Word, then He gives you the power of begetting, with Himself, yourself and all things, and His own power which is the same as this Word. Then you too are, with the Father, and in the Father’s power, unceasingly bearing yourself and all things in the present now.” (*Meister Eckhart. Sermon 89*)

These words from Meister Eckhart, briefly outline what the invitation is for, the peace and light into which we are called.

In fasting, we deny ourselves, in acts of charity, we deny ourselves, in prayer we acknowledge the Father through his Son, the Eternal Word. The more I deny myself the more the Holy Spirit can bring me into the Father’s light.

May Lent find us ready to listen as the Father bids us “come” may our hearts not be hardened as at Meribah and Massah, but rather accept the invitation.

“[May] he may grant you that you be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit.” (Ephesians 3:16)