

Every so often you must find yourself wondering why the set of readings for a particular Sunday seem to bear so little relationship to each other. Isn't the service supposed to have a discernible theme? Shouldn't the readings complement each other in some way? It certainly makes it easier for the congregation – and sometimes it's easier for the preacher too! But you may well be thinking that today is one of those 'difficult' days.

It isn't hard to see what the Gospel is doing. It is the conventional reading for the first Sunday in Lent. Each year we have it in one or other of the three New Testament versions of the story. It sets out the justification, the template for the forty days of Lent and the associated expectation of some form of self-discipline. I'll come back to it later, because Luke's version has an interesting and significant difference from the other two. It's pretty obvious why Psalm 91 is set for today as well, as the devil quotes directly from it in his dialogue with the devil. So those two excerpts fit together, and fit the occasion, pretty well.

But what is the relevance of the other readings? The Old Testament one sounds more appropriate for Harvest Festival, and the short piece from Romans goes to considerable lengths to emphasise that salvation is for everyone who believes in God, whatever their origins. How do these help us as we begin our observance of a Holy Lent?

The reading from Deuteronomy comes towards the end of a very extensive exposition of the laws and customs that the Israelites are to follow. Moses recounts a piece of comparatively recent history that would have been well-known to his audience – the story of Jacob and his sons, how they came to live in Egypt and how their descendants eventually made their escape. They had found themselves in an unendurable situation, they cried out to the Lord in whom they believed, and they were rescued. Moses tells the Israelites that the Lord still has more to do for them; he will bring them to the land he has promised. When this happens, the people are to give thanks. We can interpret this as a suitably Lenten analogy for repentance, deliverance from evil and thanksgiving for salvation. But we can go further than this, and perhaps find something which is even more helpful for a twenty-first century Lent.

We are already in the Promised Land. We haven't trekked together through the wilderness, but have each come to God by our own particular route. We live in a prosperous society, we have more than enough in material terms, we have families, friends and colleagues – people we love and whose presence we enjoy; people who love us and are concerned for our well-being. We already have so much to be thankful for. So much that sometimes it can be helpful to turn our minds to thank God for what we are not – not hungry, not cold, not homeless, not without control over our own lives, not persecuted, because that will help us focus more directly on the desperate needs of others. Those who were at the Ash Wednesday service heard the reading in which God is speaking through Isaiah: 'Look – you serve your own interests on your fast day....will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice....to share your bread with the hungry....to cover the naked....to break every yoke?"

Lent is a time to consider not just how we can give something up, which runs the risk of serving our own interests, but how we can give something back. 'Giving up for Lent' can be a valuable spiritual discipline, but think how much more effective it can be if it is also a practical discipline. Those 'first fruits' can certainly be money given to a good cause – the price of the chocolate not eaten or

the gin and tonic not drunk. But they can also, or instead, be time or skills used to bring solid, tangible benefit to others. Giving up an hour of television in order to write letters for Amnesty, for example, or swapping a regular session at the gym for a stint helping immigrant women learn English.

Which brings us back to the Gospel, because identifying the fast that is right for us needs thought and prayer, and spiritual discipline is not just for Lent. Matthew says that Jesus was ‘led by the Spirit into the wilderness.’ Mark is more dramatic: ‘the Spirit drove him into the wilderness.’ Both of these sound as though, once Jesus was well and truly in the wilderness, the Spirit went away and left him to his own resources. Luke’s version, which we heard today, says that Jesus ‘was led by the Spirit in the wilderness.’ This paints a different and much more encouraging picture. During those forty days, Jesus was led for the whole time by the Spirit, accompanying, strengthening, directing him, so that by the time the devil appeared, Jesus was well-prepared. A period of fasting and prayer is not one of abandonment and isolation. It is an opportunity to make time and space to hear and respond to the Spirit, to build our own spiritual strength so that it will serve us better in the busy, complicated everyday world we all inhabit. ‘The word is near you’, says St Paul, and this is our chance to come so close that we hear that word for ourselves, and understand how we are to act on it.