

Genesis 2. 15 – 17; 3. 1 – 7

Matthew 4. 1 – 11

Fr Alex

We have begun our Lenten journey towards Easter together, and as we sung in our first hymn, our “forty days and forty nights” of preparation imitate the time that Jesus spent in the wilderness, as we heard in our Gospel reading.

But if you were to go to a calendar and count out the days from Ash Wednesday until Easter Day, you’d see that Lent actually lasts for forty *six* days. So what’s going on?

And while we’re at it, why does Easter fall on a different date each year? Wouldn’t it be much easier if it was like Christmas, which we always celebrate on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December without fail?

The short answer is that the mystery of Easter, the death and resurrection of Jesus, is so great that it is out of our control; we can’t neatly mark it in a box on a calendar, and fit it into all the other commitments of life. Everything else revolves around this great mystery of our salvation.

The slightly longer answer is rich with symbolism, and helps us to enter a little deeper into that mystery.

Put as simply as possible, we first find the date of the spring equinox, when day and night are the same length, then we look for the first full moon after that date.

The equinox is the moment when the day finally begins to overtake the night, after the long dark and cold of winter. Boy are we looking forward to that, after the miserable start to this year.

The first full moon after the equinox is the moment when the earth is lit up for a full 24 hours, when there is not a moment without light – during the day by the sun, and during the night by the brilliance of the full moon.

Light triumphs over darkness, the bursting into life of spring triumphs over the death of winter.

And the first Sunday after that full moon is Easter Day, the first day of the week, the first day of the new age of light and life brought about by Jesus’ triumph over death.

Every Sunday is a celebration of that first Easter Day – even our six Sundays in Lent cannot be bound by whatever fast or discipline we might have taken on during the season.

That’s why Lent is only “forty days and forty nights:” the Sundays don’t count. The new life of Easter cannot be contained, just as Jesus could not be contained by the walls of the tomb.

Easter is not like a saint's day or even Christmas Day – it is not an anniversary. We're not simply remembering something that happened a little over two thousand years ago.

The mystery is so great that it can only be celebrated by the whole of creation joining in together to tell the story. At Easter, nature instructs *us*; and only when nature is ready can we all begin the great song of praise.

This is a powerful witness in an age in which we so often manipulate and exploit the natural world to our own ends, and seek to control it for ourselves: a bit like Adam and Eve in our first reading, just taking what they wanted. And look where it got them.

The wonderful truth of Easter is that it is out of our control. And the same is true for this time of Lent that comes before it.

We could impose the strictest discipline on ourselves, we could become the most holy people who ever lived: but what more could we do, that Christ has not already done for us on the cross, and through the empty tomb?

Our celebration of Easter Day is not dependent on how good we've been during Lent; it has already happened, it is already happening all around us, as the natural signs of the coming spring show us. It is out of our control.

So why do we keep Lent at all?

Well let's look to our Gospel reading. Straight after his baptism, "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness." And he is tempted by the devil.

Notice that the whole experience is out of Jesus' control. The Spirit leads him; the devil takes him first one place, then another, and offers him all he could ever want.

What makes the difference, what enables Jesus to triumph in this great time of temptation, is his closeness to God, and his complete and utter faith in him. His willingness to give up control over his own life, his destiny; even to give up his reliance on the most essential things like food and safety; and put it all in God's hands.

In a sense this time of the testing of Jesus that we read about today is an image of our whole experience of life. We will be tested by the temptations of status and riches; even essential things like food and drink and our own health and safety can begin to hold us captive, if we allow ourselves to become obsessed with them.

There will be times when we will feel like we don't have control over our own lives, and that's because we don't: someone, or something, will always be trying to wrestle it away from us.

Lent is the time when we restore control by giving it up. When we go, like Jesus, into a wilderness time, and do away as far as we are able, with all those temptations that lead us

where we don't want to go: and we try to come as close to God as we can; to put our faith and trust in him.

Giving up control should not be something that alarms us; we should be greatly encouraged in Lent and indeed throughout our lives, that no matter what we do, big or small: it is not really up to us to make it work.

Whatever it might be, if we offer it to God in faith, and trust in him, he can do wonderful things with it. As Easter shows us, he can transform even death itself, into new and abundant life.

May that be our prayer and our discipline, this Lenten time. Amen.