

Over the centuries, Lent has been understood in a variety of ways. The oldest view of it seems to have been as a time of immediate preparation for those who were to be baptized that year at Easter.

From a very early date, Easter with its solemn celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus, was seen as a particularly apt moment for baptism. Our contemporary liturgy of Easter invites us to recall our baptism, to deepen our appreciation of it and its implications for us, and to renew the promises and commitments we made or were made in our name, when we were baptized.

In order to help us do that, the liturgy of Lent encourages us to reflect on our selves, our priorities and commitments, our faith and our loves. The first two of today's Scripture readings touch on distinctive features of biblical faith, first in the Old Testament and then in the New.

The act of faith we find in today's reading from the Book of Deuteronomy is in the form of a narrative or a story. It takes place within the context of a ritual offering to God of the first fruits of the land. The sense the Israelites have of God is of someone whom they have come to know in the course of their history. He has been with them and guided them and at a crucial moment intervened in order to free them from the "affliction, toil and oppression" they were suffering in

Egypt. Having brought them out of slavery, he has now led them to the Promised Land, a land, as today's reading describes it, "flowing with milk and honey."

The Bible and especially the psalms, the prayer book of Israel, are permeated with a sense of God as living and active and as involved in the most intimate way in the lives of individuals and of the nation. He is the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God who made a covenant with the people through Moses at Mt Sinai. To sustain such faith, one needs to remember God's past deeds and his promises for the future.

A major sin against which the prophets repeatedly warn the Israelites is forgetfulness, forgetfulness of God's graciousness to them and of who they are as people of the covenant. When memory fades, so too does this kind of faith. God becomes more distant and unreal.

Christian faith presupposes and builds on the faith of Israel. God's revelation of himself in the course of biblical history as a God of liberation and salvation, has been brought to a new level in the person, life and destiny of Jesus. "He who sees me," Jesus once said, "sees the Father." The biblical God, Paul declared, is present in Jesus reconciling the world to himself. The Gospel of John proclaims Jesus as the Word or Wisdom of God in human form.

In today's reading from the letter to the Romans, Paul affirms the centrality of Jesus to Christian faith. In him, God has reached out to us, offering us forgiveness and reconciliation.

Faith, Paul says, involves both the lips and the heart. We confess our faith in words, whether they be our own or those of some fixed formula such as the Apostles' Creed. As important as such confession is, however, it is not enough. Faith reaches beyond words to the mysterious reality of God who goes beyond our words and our images. At the same time, it engages us in a deeply personal way. In the Bible, the heart, of which Paul here speaks, points to the centre of our being, to those things that define us as human beings. To believe from the heart involves a handing over in trust and hope of oneself to God. Such faith brings peace and inner strength in the face of challenges of whatever kind. The Hebrew word for faith suggests a leaning on God, a finding of support in him.

I have always been struck by the fact that at the centre of the liturgy of the Mass is an act of memory. When the priest proclaims the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, "Do this in memory of me," we are invited to remember his life, death and resurrection. A conscious and prayerful remembering of Jesus in this

way can renew and deepen our faith. Here is one reason among many why the Mass is such a gift and why we need to participate in it on a regular basis.

The liturgy both brings God closer to us and enables us, in, with, and through Jesus, to entrust ourselves to the infinite love of the one who is the origin and goal of our lives and of all that is.