First Sunday of Lent: Repent and Believe!

In his famous 1980 encyclical on mercy, Dives in Misericordia (Rich in Mercy), Pope St. John Paul II wrote, “Conversion to God always consists in discovering His mercy, that is, in discovering that love which is patient and kind (Cf. 1 Cor. 13:4) as only the Creator and Father can be; the love to which the ‘God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (2 Cor. 1:3) is faithful to the uttermost consequences in the history of His covenant with man; even to the cross and to the death and resurrection of the Son” (DM 13).

The readings for the first Sunday of Lent stress the call for conversion but also God’s loving presence in the midst of trials and temptations. In the first reading from Gen. 9:8-15, we see God’s pledge of fidelity in His covenant promises to Noah, and in the Gospel, we read of Jesus’ temptation in the desert and then his proclamation to the people of Galilee: “Repent, and believe in the Gospel” (Mk 1:15).

For pilgrims who visit the Holy Land, the holy places in Galilee are one of the greatest spiritual opportunities in our lives to see in person the places that are so intimately connected to Our Lord’s earthly ministry. But we can also succumb to the temptation of despair regarding both the continued presence of the Christians in the Holy Land – now down to barely 2% of the total population – and the prospects for a meaningful peace.

The Gospel reading for this First Sunday is thus a powerful one. Driven by the Holy Spirit into the desert, Christ endures temptation from the devil, showing us that in our own temptation we should never lose hope, knowing God’s promises to be with us. Christ then returned to Galilee and in the wake of John the Baptist’s arrest He continued to proclaim the Gospel with His call to repentance. We can see the holy places of Galilee – Cana, Nazareth, Tiberias, Bethsaida, Mt. Tabor – not with the eyes of fear and despondency but with a renewed zeal to redouble our commitments to aid the Christians of the region and to pray and work for peace.

Our contribution to the Pontifical Good Friday Collection will help preserve that Christian presence and assist the peace-filled labors of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land. We pray that all of those who today cannot set aside their hatred or their inability to see a path to peace will have that change of heart, see that the Kingdom of God is truly at hand, repent, and experience God’s mercy. As St. John Paul II wrote, “Conversion to God is always the fruit of the rediscovery of this Father, who is rich in mercy” (DM 13).