

## *Forty equals Fifty*

Forty is a number frequently used in Scripture. For example:

- Noah experiences forty days and nights of rainfall before dry land appears;
- Moses spends forty days and nights on Mount Sinai prior to descending with the ten commandments;
- the Israelites spend forty years wandering through a desert in search of the Promised Land, ultimately to find it;
- the prophet Elijah journeys through a desert forty days and forty nights to meet God on Mount Horeb;
- Jesus spends forty days and nights in a desert preparing for his future ministry;
- the disciples are educated and consoled by the risen Christ forty days prior to his ascension.

Why forty all the time? And how do such quantified incidents apply to us? Well, forty signified the number of years one could expect to live in ancient times. Forty therefore became synonymous with “a lifetime.” And so, allegorically, even as Noah experienced forty days and nights of rainfall, our lives may also be deluged with troubles yet one day also witness to a rainbow and dry land again.

Or even as the Israelites wandered hungry, thirsty forty years in a desert - for what seemed a lifetime - we ourselves may live to go through so much stress, aimlessness, only to arrive at a land flowing with milk and honey.

Or, taking the forty days the risen Jesus spent widening the vision and hearts of his disciples, so also does the Church transfigure us ever increasingly over our lifetime by way of the Gospel and the Eucharist as a replication of those meals at Emmaus and by the Sea of Galilee.

So much for the number forty. But what about *pentecost*, the Greek word for fifty? Does it have any allegorical meaning? Of course it does! Pentecost marks the close of the fifty-day period after Easter when the Holy Spirit descended upon the early Church. So fifty becomes a symbol of the Holy Spirit, that divine force not immediately visible to us in our everyday world but as present as - say - the number fifty is within the number forty.

“Fifty contained within forty?” Well, just line up all the numbers by which forty can be evenly divided. You’ll end up with the numbers 20, 10, 8, 5, 4, 2 and 1. And what do they add up to? Fifty! A latent fifty within the smaller forty - even as the boundless Holy Spirit (the power behind the poetry, music and deeds of compassion that make our world just and beautiful) works imperceptibly within each of us to render us as radiant as the risen Christ himself.

As I mentioned last week, math nowadays can be tedious, much too serious. In the old days of the Church numbers could be fun – and really count for something.