

The First Sunday in Lent

Genesis 9: 8-17

1 Peter 3: 18-22

Mark 1: 9-15

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. The season of Lent began on Ash Wednesday last week – and so we begin a 40 day period of preparation for Easter – the most important festival of the church's year. If you look around, you might notice some subtle changes in our Liturgy and our furnishings:

- no flowers
- change in tone of the music
- colour purple - the colour of preparation and journeying

Why do we make these changes? Partly to give the season a special flavour – partly to simplify things in order that we sharpen our focus on God. Ash Wednesday set the scene. That was a solemn day; a day of corporate repentance, a day in which the scriptures call us to focus on prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

Lent is one of the oldest seasons of the year. We can trace its origins right back to the earliest centuries because this is the time when new Christians were prepared for baptism. Baptisms were usually celebrated at Easter because Baptism is the sacrament in which we are joined to Jesus' dying and rising again, so the best time to baptise is when the church is entering into Jesus' death and resurrection through its prayer and liturgy. All the connections come together with amazing resonances. Lent is a time to meet God again, as if for the first time. Make this a time for a fresh start, for renewing your journey of faith with Christ. Come with us on a journey to the cross and to the empty tomb. Diary in the Holy Week Liturgies! Make sure you can make it to the Great Vigil of Easter where the final passing over from death to life is dramatised in a movement from darkness to light and we hear the great sweep of God's saving work rehearsed in scripture.

God longs to be in relationship with us. As we hear the Old Testament stories of our faith again, we notice many new starts.

Today we hear Noah's story after the great flood, but there will be more: the Exodus, the return of the exiles from Babylon. All these take place because God takes the initiative. This is another aspect to this covenant relationship God has with us his holy people. In the covenant relationship it is God who takes the initiative. We often think our relationship with God is all about us: my decision for Christ and my choice to be disciples. When I was at Sunday School we even used to sing it, "I have decided to follow Jesus," and it was sometimes led by an African with a row of very shiny white teeth. In way the notion that a relationship with God is about "my choice" is a fallacy. How many stories are there in the bible of people finding God? Not many! I am struggling to think of one. All through the bible it is God who finds us, who calls us, who first takes the initiative. God tells Noah to build the ark. God calls Abraham and Sarah and gives them a child. God sends Moses and Miriam down to Egypt. God calls Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Isaiah and Deborah. God sends Jesus: God comes to us and God calls us. It's actually all about God. All we have to do is say "Yes" but that "Yes" should come with a danger warning. All of those leaders ended

up doing things they never imagined themselves capable of doing and they went on adventures most people would find too dangerous.

In the first reading from Genesis, we have the story of Noah at the end of a catastrophic flood. God sets the rainbow in the sky as a reminder of an everlasting covenant. This is God's new start with His holy people, promising never to allow the earth to swept by such a massive flood again. The sign that stands as a witness to the reality of God's faithfulness is the bow in the sky, a rainbow. The bow, of course, is normally a weapon like the bow and arrow of Robin Hood; a weapon of war, hostility and destruction. That the bow is now suspended in the sky means that God has disarmed himself. God has hung up the weapon. He has no intention of being an aggressor or an adversary. The rainbow is God's sign of peace and reconciliation. God will be at peace with the world and from now on the world will be a place of promise.

Most scholars of the bible believe that Israel's teachers and theologians used the story of Noah to encourage the exiles in Babylon. The exiles had indeed witnessed terrible destruction on the scale of the flood; a BCE6th century ground zero. Yet God cared for them. Like Noah, God's people will be kept safe on the Ark of the Covenant. God will not bring about another flood. God will be faithful to the covenant. God will bring about a fresh start and do a new thing.

In Mark's gospel today, we are witnesses once again to Jesus' baptism; the starting gun has been fired in his journey that will culminate on the cross. We see God sending his Holy Spirit on Jesus in the form of a dove and empowering him to inaugurate the Kingdom. Mark's account of Jesus' experience in the wilderness is brief. We hear today that immediately Jesus was baptised, he was driven out into the desert where he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited upon him. And that's all we are told. But in spite of its brevity, this part of Mark's story of Jesus is overlaid with meaning. It is the story of the journey from Egypt all over again. Just as the Israelites went through

water into the desert, so does Jesus. He too has his sojourn in the desert.

All through the bible the desert is a metaphorical place as much as it is a geographical place. We often think of the wilderness as a place of negativity; a dry place with scorching heat, inhabited by snakes, scorpions and cacti. But in the bible, the desert is a positive place. Why? Because the wilderness is a place where the people are forced to trust God because there is nothing else. The prophets imagined the desert as a place where God takes Israel, his bride to be, to woo her; and so in the desert God is the seducing lover. The desert, therefore, is a place of seduction and growth. In the desert the people live the psalmist's prayer, "My soul is thirsting for you O Lord my God, like a dry weary land without water, so my soul longs for you." The Israelites under Moses' leadership learned to trust God alone for bread and water. Elijah sojourned in the desert for 40 days after defeating the prophets of Ba'al on Mt Carmel. He, too, was fed and watered by God. All through the bible, the people of God discover in the wilderness their need of God. They find gifts

they didn't know they had and get to know aspects of God that were previously hidden.

Jesus too has his wilderness experience. He is driven into the desert immediately after his baptism, into a place without the support of family or community, and where the essentials for living are scarce. This simple scene concisely portrays the perilous journey that Jesus faces as he begins his ministry. In the book of Daniel the wild beasts are associated with powers exercised by human rulers; the great kingdoms standing arrayed against God. Here, that image is recalled, telling us in advance that these will be the very powers that Jesus will confront Jesus later in his ministry. The very identity of Jesus in this gospel always puts him in peril. Jesus' ministry will not be one of exaltation and glory. It will involve a costly journey to the cross. This is a risky journey, a journey of faith. Danger lurks at every turn. But we also know that the dangers will not defeat Jesus. The one who journeys with the wild beasts and who is fed by angels will ultimately triumph.

God is calling you to join with us on that journey with Christ. Are you willing to risk the desert for a new beginning with God? New discovery and "a new beginning" with God is what this season Lent is all about. Lent is an invitation. Come with us on that journey, brothers and sisters, through the wilderness to the cross and into the Promised Land. Come on that journey. It's risky but incredibly exciting and rewarding, for it will take us to the very wellsprings of salvation, to the tree of life, to the One who is all we will ever need. I commend Lent to you; come on the journey.