

Sermon Lent 1 Year B 2024

Genesis 9:8-15, 1 Peter 3:18-22, Mark 1:12-15.

Good news in floods and deserts

We have apposite juxtaposition of floods and wilderness in our readings today. The wilderness being the biblical term for the deserts of the Middle East such as the Jordanian desert. I've spent a lot of time in deserts they can be hard and unforgiving places. And yet they are also places of change and focus on essence of life. We can think of them as empty and barren and yet they are not. They are places of change quite literally in the sense that much life of forests and oceans has swept upon them in history and also in the short moment too when the rain comes and dormant seeds flourish and flower in an almost miraculous way and in the shortest of time spans. They are places of focus as the quiet and isolation can strip away all that has little ultimate value in life. And so it is in the Gospel of Mark where Jesus begins his ministry after baptism and a desert experience.

Central to the theme of the Good News announced by Jesus Christ is the preaching of the Kingdom of God. This is very clear in our gospel "the time has come and the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent and believe the Good News." Jesus taught us to pray for it in the Lord's prayer where invoke the imminence of the kingdom and seeking forgiveness is central. Preparing for God's Kingdom permeates Salvation History; from creation, the choice of good and evil life and death from Adam through the whole of the Old testament, the life of our Lord and the history of the church to our present day.

There are different stages and covenants forged broken and remade finding fulfilment in Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary – where it is shown that God is present - always faithful and true.

We read of covenant with Noah and the building of the Ark in Genesis today. The story is used to show that God saves even in the midst of water that can bring death. This should evoke our baptism for rightly understood Noah's Ark and the waters of the flood prefigure the words of our second reading. We are to mark well the difference between the Ark of Noah saving a few and the faithfulness of one man. Now through Christ's body – the Church we have the ark for all. The waters of the flood brought destruction and death whereas the waters of baptism bring life and newness.

That great African saint Augustine drew upon and contrasted the image of Ark and Cross. The wood of the Ark and the flood just hint and prefigure the

universal means of salvation brought by Christ with the wood of the Cross and waters of baptism.

The great biblical sweep of history is preparation for salvation and so is the sweep of our lives. Of course our lives can sometimes seem banal, ordinary and inconsequential and yet we should remember the greatest co-operators with God in salvation history often fits that ordinariness; from Moses to Mary and the fishermen. Our stations of the cross on Friday I think brought that home to us how the extraordinary love of God on the cross is to be played out in ordinary life as preparation for membership of God's kingdom.

Acquiring and reacquiring good habits of prayer and worship, fasting, and charity is fundamental to Lenten disciplines characteristic of all Christian communities. Through the disciplines of Lent by grace we may acquire habits with which we can truly be members of the Kingdom of God. Through prayer and worship we show our love for God and neighbour - we communicate with God allowing his "will to be done" as we pray in the Lords prayer it takes us out of ourselves. Fasting can show a better and truer love for self in the sense of less is more and Jesus wants us to love ourselves so that we may love others. The third traditional strand of lent is almsgiving or charity and becomes the manifestation of this truer love of God, self and neighbour – with right motive it becomes love in action.

Preparing for the Kingdom and acquiring good habits is not easy and being incorporated by baptism into Christ's body is not like an inoculation from the travails of life. Remember the sequence of our Gospel it is quite abrupt in Mark. After Jesus's baptism it is the spirit that drives him out into the wilderness to face the summaries of all temptations, of wealth, power and false idols for us to worship and crave. Of course these are not specified so clearly in Mark as they are elsewhere and perhaps this may help us in our ordinary lives where temptation can seem less dramatic but no different in substance.

Our Lord is the pattern for resisting but also because he is always faithful – he is the remedy for our shortcomings and failings. When Jesus came up out of the the water after his baptism God's voice is heard saying "In you I am well pleased". In a real sense through the prism of our baptism God looks at us through Christ and says the same – he might not be pleased at each and every choice and turn of our life but through love – fulfilled on the cross – he never breaks the covenant and promise. We can only appreciate this through the whole life of Jesus and we are to in a real sense put the trials and tribulations of our moments into the hand of God that we may let him make sense of it all and hear the unconditional words of love. It is this unconditional love that can save us whether from the dramatic floods of life or the lost wilderness seeming nothing and bring us home His Kingdom of mercy, peace, and joy.

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