

First Sunday in Lent Year B

The season of Lent is an overlay of the crisis moments in Jesus' ministry in Galilee and Jerusalem and the reasons behind the passion story. And for us, a mixture of reflection on that ministry as example: how are we to change in response?

Gen 9: 8-17

God's covenant with Noah is interesting because it is apparently a covenant without obligations. God does not demand, as he does in other, later covenants, good behaviour on the part of his people. This is simply a statement of God's good will towards them. Incidentally, it is a sign of God's good will towards the domestic animals and every animal on the earth.

The sign, of course, is the rainbow, which we know now as caused by the refraction of sunlight through water droplets. We see a rainbow when we stand with our back to the sun and look at rain clouds from which rain is falling. In our part of the world the prevailing winds are westerly blowing clouds - and rain - towards the east. Most of us are aware of rainbows during the day, perhaps during the early afternoon or evening, when the rain clouds we are looking at are in fact moving away from us. It would be interesting to know whether this matches the pattern that might have prevailed in the Ancient Near East when this story was put together. We read the rainbow as a sign that the rain (representing the hard times) is over and we can once again get out the picnic table or the barbecue.

Ps 25: 1-10

This is a beautiful psalm of tranquillity and calm. The psalmist is honest enough to acknowledge his own failings, but the whole psalm sings of his quiet confidence in God. It is not upon his own moral rectitude that he relies, but wholly on the grace, the goodness, of God.

Notice how the psalmist holds together these two ideas. On the one hand he is willing to confess his faults and to rely wholly upon God's goodness and readiness to forgive. On the other, this is no idle complacency. As Paul put it in his letter to the Romans (6:1): shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! The psalmist asks for God's guidance as well as God's forgiveness, so that he may sin no more.

Epistle 1 Pet 3: 18-22

Much ink has been spilled over these verses, in our human attempts to understand how it can be that the death of Jesus makes a real difference to us. The argument was begun in chapter 2 with a discussion of just and unjust suffering. Some of Peter's readers were apparently claiming that they were "suffering for Christ" when in fact they had done wrong and deserved the punishment meted out to them. If you want an example of unjust suffering, he went on, just look at Jesus on the cross. He bore our sins to that cross.

Think of that statement as a response to the kind of arguments Peter's readers were advancing, rather than a bald statement of the theology of the cross.

Here in chapter 3 we have a re-statement of the same principle: he suffered once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous. Human unrighteousness (think of a lost moral compass) – indeed perhaps even our own personal unrighteousness – contributed to the sequence of events that led to Christ's death. Christ died in order that (somehow, far beyond our understanding) we might recover that moral compass and once again be "on course".

The bulk of this reading, however, is about the parallel between baptism and redemption. Peter highlights the role of water, both in dealing with the corruption and wickedness of humanity before Noah's time, and in baptism which signifies our human claim upon whatever it was that Christ achieved on the cross by suffering ... the righteous for the unrighteous.

There's one more fascinating snippet here, in verse 19, where it is claimed that during the three days in the tomb Jesus descended into hell" (as the Creed has it) and preached to the souls of those caught up in the wickedness of the time before the flood. This story has many possible interpretations. For me the point is surely that in Christ the love of God can reach even the most lost of people.

Gospel Mark 1: 9-15

Mark's account of Jesus' baptism is noteworthy for a variety of reasons. Mark is not concerned about the conversation between Jesus and John. Mark simply "cuts to the chase" and records the plain fact that Jesus was baptised by John, and then received the affirmation of his heavenly father.

This is a prelude to the temptations in the wilderness. Once again Mark is terse in the extreme. There is no detail here, merely the fact that it happened. John was soon arrested, Jesus' cue for the beginning of his own ministry.

In presenting himself for baptism, Jesus was identifying himself with the people who were the object of John's mission – and in due course, of his own. There had been too much lofty imperialism from Rome, some beneficent, but much harsh and oppressive, robbing subject peoples of their humanity while imposing on them strong government and the *pax Romana*. God's way, in and through Jesus, was different. Watch as the weeks of Lent unfold, for signs of this difference, and ask: what of today's world and today's church?