

1st Sunday Lent (B)

18th February 2024

‘Forgiven, not condemned’

Gen 9: the Covenant with Noah — rainbow

1Pt 3: *that water is a type of the baptism which saves you now*

Mk 1: 12–15: Jesus’s forty days in the wilderness

One of my strongest memories of Primary School is of the term when we learnt a long choral piece — a cantata for children — that we were to perform along with other local schools. It was in nine sections, and took about half an hour to sing; it demanded lots and lots of patient rehearsing in school time; then it demanded lots and lots of rehearsing in a common venue with all the other schools; ultimately, we put it on, at the local Music School. A success, if I remember rightly; but all that childhood rehearsing meant that the melodies have stayed, some of them, in my head ever since! It was called *Captain Noah and his Floating Zoo*, a bit of a classic (in the 70s!). “Rain and rain and rain and rain and rain,” went one of the refrains, “rain and rain and rain and rain and rain.” It certainly taught us inside-out the beautiful Genesis account of the Great Flood — no bad thing!

You might be wondering what *Noah’s Flood* has got

to do with the 1st Sunday of Lent? Why do we hear that 1st reading today, and an echo of it in the 2nd reading? Well, it’s because over the coming Sundays of Lent we hear a lot about the various different covenants that God made with man in the course of the Old Testament. This week the covenant with **Noah**; next week, the covenant with **Abraham**; and the week after, we’re with **Moses** in the post-exodus wilderness. All of these early covenants prepare the People of God for a “new covenant ... written on their hearts,” that will point forward ultimately to the Covenant in Jesus’s blood shed on the Cross.

For now, we hear of the old covenants: Noah, Abraham, Moses. In each development God moves forward His relationship with mankind. First He saves a **one family group** from His wrath, marked by the sign of the rainbow; then He forms a **people** descended from Abraham, marked by the sign of circumcision; then He **teaches His people** and gives them the Law — the sign of the 10 commandments — and a ritual for worship. At each stage of the Covenants, God takes the initiative, gradually

maturing a people who will know Him and love Him. It starts out seemingly brutal, as He threatens to wipe mankind off the face of the earth; but gradually it becomes more gentle; until in Jesus Christ, *God takes onto Himself* the very sins He's wanting to deliver man from.

Surely the key first message for Lent from this early Covenant with Noah is that God does not wish to destroy, but to save; *He does not wish to condemn, but to forgive*. The point of this account of Noah is that mankind's sins go so against God's purpose for man, fly so in the face of what God made us for, that God could be justified in His righteous anger. It's a strong biblical theme of the Old Testament: God's wrath at man's unfaithfulness. He could well wish to destroy all but the faithful few. This would be an understandable reaction to the sinfulness of mankind. But even that 1st Covenant with Noah, that early promise made to mankind, shows that this is not God's intention. He does not wish to destroy or condemn; He wishes to save and forgive. God will instead strive and teach; will love and lavish gifts on us, that we may learn to know Him.

That God is lenient with us gives us hope: He forgives and forgives again. Lent is a time to ponder this mercy of God. He gives us freedom and responsibility, to respond to His invitation. He does not threaten us with the deluge, with the flood, with calamity. The sign of the Cross is now His sign of love; and even the sign of the rainbow (as Genesis would put it) is the sign that His anger has abated. Lent is the season when we are given a chance to show just that freedom and responsibility. For some members of our Chaplaincy, this Lent is when they're making their final preparations for Baptism, expressing very openly their free response to God's invitation. And for all of us it's the season for *renewing* our free commitment to the Baptism we have already received. Immediately after His Baptism, Jesus was driven by the Holy Spirit into the desert. We want to spend these 40 days and nights of Lent with Him there, re-enlivening the promises made at our Baptism.

Let's think a bit more about that Gospel account of Jesus's days in the wilderness. We were pondering last

month, when we started on this year's ('Year B') readings from St Mark ch. 1, that this Gospel is by far the most concise and punchy. So, when it comes to Our Lord's time in the wilderness, we get only the barest account, and none of the details of His temptations from the devil that we get in other Gospels. But what we do see clearly is that out of His 'retreat' in the Judaeen desert comes a sense that in that isolation He is at one with the powers of heaven, and from that comes the impetus for His preaching the Gospel.

It's certainly a harsh landscape. Of my 4 trips to the Holy Land, I think I've been twice into the Judaeen wilderness. It's bare, it's rocky, it's unforgiving. Little if any room for comforts: just you and the rock and the sky, really. One time, our group had Mass out there, the stunning backdrop to the Mass being the bare, rocky, sun-drenched dunes, and we felt very much at one with the Saviour in His focussed mission to be here on earth with us. Another time, I travelled out from Jerusalem to this wilderness with a group of priests in a 'sherut' minibus-type taxi, and after an awfully bumpy ride over gravel-

strewn sort-of roads, we just got out in the middle of nowhere and took it in. Again, that time too, the landscape was awesome to behold: austere, forbidding, and yet full of the silence of that barrier-less communion with God that Jesus knew always, and which He expressed so evidently in His 40 days. On that occasion, I bent down to pick up a souvenir, a piece of that Judaeen wilderness — I was very worried about taking it back through airport security (Israel's airport officials are renowned for their thoroughness!) but they missed it; I got it home; and I still have it (see! ...). *And did those feet, in ancient time, walk upon this particular rock of mine? Who knows?*

Hard and stony, no hiding places, facing up to reality of life before God — is that the Lent we envisage? No comforts? Yes, perhaps Lent can seem to loom ahead of us dauntingly, if we take it seriously, and yet we should embrace it lovingly as a great opportunity each Spring, for the spring-clean of our soul. Because we are *not alone* in this wilderness of Lent; we have precisely put ourselves here because Jesus is here: He is the centre of our Lent,

and He is the one and only reason for our Lenten penance. If we enter into Lent properly, we will find the Lord; and having found the Lord, we will find forgiveness.

Lent's penances are traditionally taken on, then, so that we can *turn to God more*, we can *give away more*, and we can *consume less*, that's to say: **prayer, almsgiving and fasting**. These are the three great ways given to us on Ash Wednesday, last week, for our Lenten observance. These ways of disciplining ourselves we take on freely, as ways of responsible faith, as we own up to the past and admit our need to do better. I said on Ash Wednesday, and I reiterate today: I suggest you give prayerful thought to what you are taking-up or giving-up for Lent. Something of each, I suggest — without taking on so much that it all comes crashing down! (i) An element of **fasting**, of giving-up, of sacrificing a pleasure — think 'outside the box,' be creative, it might not be that the fasting you're called to is what you have "always given up" each year. (ii) An element of renewed, rededicated **prayer**, which can be as simple and profound as making it more regularly to

weekday Mass or quiet Adoration. (iii) An element of **almsgiving**, choosing a charity or good cause to benefit, whether by a donation of cash, or a gift of food to the *bona fide* homeless in our neighbourhood, or by helping out in person (our regular SVP Soup Run on Wednesdays can always make use of new helpers!). Something of each, I think is what we should aim at, to keep Lent in a holistic way: fasting, prayer *and* almsgiving.

You know, how important it is to actually have a *season* to do that in — better than some ongoing, nagging feeling that sometime I should try harder! This is the wisdom of Christ, and the wisdom of the Church: giving us a *definite 6½-week go* at putting God higher up the list of priorities ..., so that, come Easter, we can be as ready as the candidates for Baptism to make those Baptismal promises again. After the dryness of Lent, we can be offered that new water of Easter, and be refreshed with those waters, not flooded; revitalized, not drowned; brought to life in Christ, not overwhelmed by the deadly deceit of the devil; ... *forgiven, not condemned*.