

## **Prepared for Mission**

Readings: Genesis 9:8-17; 1 Peter 3:18-22 & Mark 1:9-15

When I was asked by Susan if I could preach here today and I agreed, she also invited me to write three questions to be put in the Pews News. So today I shall endeavour to begin to answer my own questions for you. On this first Sunday of Lent 2015 we have taken our first steps with Jesus in the wilderness, our Lenten pilgrimage has begun. The shadow of the cross falls across our pathway but the radiance of the empty tomb encourages us ever onward.

### **Genesis 9:8-17**

- 1 *There are accounts of a devastating flood in most Middle Eastern cultures, as well as the Hebrew Scriptures. What lessons can 21<sup>st</sup> century people learn from this event?*

I never did get to see Russell Crowe playing Noah in the so-called blockbuster movie which came out last year! Having read mixed reviews about the film, I decided not to go because I wasn't sure if I could trust the film-makers with their interpretation of the biblical text. So how do you interpret the account of Noah and the flood? Do you accept it literally that the whole earth was submerged as a punishment for sin? Or do you see this as a piece of folklore written as a warning to people to abandon sin and learn to trust God?

I love the Old Testament for its great saga's, the stories about the lives of men and women and their lives of faith. Just think how impoverished we would be if we didn't know about Moses and Zipporah, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Rachel, for example. The same goes for today's hero of faith Noah, whose wife was not named in the story but tradition calls her Naamah. We learn something vitally important from each of these patriarchs don't we? In the case of Noah I am always encouraged to read God's promise that '*... never again would there be a flood to cover the earth*'. Patently there have been floods ever since and many millions of people must have died as a result of them. Up to very recently there were floods in this country and in many places on the planet. I suppose that with about two thirds of the earth being covered with water and with two thirds of our body being composed of water we should expect floods to occur from time to time.

So has God reneged on his promise not to destroy people in a devastating flood? Of course not! If anything the opposite is true, isn't it? Our God isn't a sadistic divine entity demanding total obedience – or else! Our wonderful, long-suffering, tolerant God wants us to be saved and in order for that to occur gave up his beloved son to face the floods of death for us. And as if to encourage and lead us to real joy God taught us to read the rainbow as a sign of his enduring love. This arc of beauty reflects the goodness and grace of God and each time we see one in the sky after rain remember God our creator and redeemer and life-giver. This proof of the covenant is the most important lesson I take from this event and it encourages me to go on in God's presence and never to give up on him.

### **1 Peter 3:18-22**

- 2 *Why is Holy Baptism essential for all Christians?*

The ark of our faith now lumbers forward to the years after Christ has ascended into heaven his work of salvation complete. The links between our three lessons today are seamless just

like the robe worn by our Saviour. For as in our Genesis passage we contemplated the flood and God's covenant with his people through the ministry of Noah, so now we read in Peter's letter to the church leaders in Asia Minor how much rainbow theology impacted him. By that I mean Peter interpreted the death of Jesus as being overcome by the flood waters of death but the resurrection was like a new and iridescent rainbow of hope for all people.

It is no coincidence that we enter the community of grace, God's family the Church, through the administration of water in Baptism. In the days of Jesus people were baptized by being submerged into the water, the flood if you like, and then raised to a new spiritual life. Even today as we sprinkle water on the heads of our children and other people in baptism the link to the flood and to the flood-gates of love opened by Jesus, is abundantly clear. Therefore Baptism isn't an optional extra but a precursor of salvation because we are commanded by Jesus to bring people to faith in just this way. We must never forget the Lord commissioning the Church to

*“Go and make disciples of all nations, **baptizing** them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”*

At each and every baptism there is a reference to the flood and the salvation through the cross of Christ. Do you recall these words from our own Baptism service:

*Through the deep waters of death  
Jesus fulfilled his baptism.  
He died to set us free  
and was raised to be exalted Lord of all.  
It is Christ who baptises with the Holy Spirit  
and with fire?*

### **St Mark 1:9-15**

3 *Have you ever had a wilderness experience like Jesus and if so, what was it preparing you for?*

Our Gospel reading from St Mark begins in the waters of Baptism at the river Jordan. As Jesus stood side by side with the people he had come to save he was affirmed by his heavenly Father, *‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’* At the start of his ministry and after his Baptism, Jesus walked into the Judean wilderness for a time of testing and preparation. It was a new Springtime for humanity and as the word Lent originally meant ‘Spring’ it is good to think that way.

The temptations or testing weren't there to see whether or not Jesus would measure up to the job of Saviour and Redeemer, of-course not. The Son of God has not got it in him to fail. Essentially the temptations were a foretaste of the encounter with sin and evil that Jesus would need to be aware of in the course of his life and mission. *Stone to bread* – the temptation to trickery. *Jumping from the pinnacle of the temple* – the temptation for sensationalism. *Worshipping Satan* - the temptation for cheaply earned power and influence. All of these temptations overcome would make Jesus a stronger person for the work of salvation he had come to complete.

There are often times in life when we go through cloudy patches during which we may even be tempted to doubt God. These temptations may come in different guises but they all have

the intended effect of ruining our relationship with God and when that happens the mission is compromised and souls are in danger of being lost. Lent is a gift to the Church when we can retreat with Jesus to be strengthened and empowered for mission and share the good news of the love of God in Jesus.

For me I was tested 10 years ago exactly when I was in Christchurch hospital fighting for my life after a brain haemorrhage. I was told later that I was as close to death as it was possible to be. Today, a decade on, I rejoice that I still have my faith in God, I am able to go on loving my Elaine and our two daughters and I have been given my ministry back in which I can serve my God and proclaim his word. Of all the lessons I learnt back then it was that through the risen Christ the sting of death has been removed and we need have no fear.

May I share this quote with you?

*The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew.*

This example of a rainbow theology comes from a 200 page document I am critiquing for a meeting in Auckland next month. The author wasn't a Billy Graham or an Anglican Bishop but no less a person than Pope Francis himself. The document is called *Evangelii Gaudium* or the joy of the Gospel and it is a delight to read. Today's readings all underline the joy of the Gospel and enable us to realise how blessed we are in our faith in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So give thanks for the rainbow theology of today: the flood waters overcome and the promise of salvation sealed in the sign of the rainbow; celebrate your baptism each day and give thanks that you have followed the Lord himself in these waters of faith; and finally never let the flood of temptations which come our way these days overpower you and divert you from the heart of God. Turn temptations into testing's that they may be added to the foundations of faith instead of the quicksand of doubt.

I hope and pray that your Lent prepares you for the cross as you make your way to the empty tomb of Easter decorated lustroously with the rainbow of hope.

Amen.