

First Sunday of Lent – 18 February 2024

Message – Finding the way of the new covenant

Creator, Redeemer and Giver of Life, reveal to us your way so that we may proclaim your good news. **Amen.**

I don't feel I have quite got to grips with today's readings. Both of our New Testament readings are distinctive. St Peter's theology is often overshadowed by St Paul's and Mark's by Mathew and Luke. It is hard to hear Peter and Mark's distinctive voices and to notice what is different. I think we do ourselves a disservice by thinking that the New Testament is a unified whole and does not have different voices. Within the Hebrew scriptures there are very different voices and debate is an essential part of Hebrew theology, which we often lack as Christians.

In Christian scriptures, there are five covenants God makes with humanity. Our first reading was the first covenant, a one-sided affair, where God does all the work. Whenever there is a rainbow, a sky-bow, God will remember not to destroy *'every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.'*

The covenant still stands. Many of us are comforted when we see a rainbow, it touches our heart deeply. The pessimist in me, along with one of the commentators I was reading, note that God only promises not to use flood to destroy us! There seem to be so many other creative ways in which life on earth could become profoundly challenging, both human challenges and natural ones. Yet, I also see hope.

The international community now tracks over twenty-five thousand asteroids that might, at some point, cross earth's path. Occasional surprises do appear, but they are increasingly rare. After the tsunami of 2004, we set up an early warning system. There is progress, we are learning. Perhaps, God is giving us the tools to guard against disaster. The greater question is whether we have the wisdom to use those tools for the collective good.

Our reading from the first letter of Peter creates links between the first covenant, the covenant with Noah, and our gospel reading. Peter sees the flood as a form of baptism, a washing clean, and just as the sky-bow appeals to God, so does baptism.

There is quite a lot in the letters of Peter where it is easy for us to bring with us what Paul has said and impose it on Peter's words. It is also easy to read into this passage things that are not there. Though it says, '*baptism now saves you*', we are not to understand that baptism is sufficient for salvation. One only need think of the repeated failures of humanity to realise that the flood, while resulting in the first covenant with God did not result in a transformation for all of humanity into faithful followers of the all-powerful God.

Baptism itself does not, usually, transform people. For Peter, faith is the necessary prerequisite of baptism, they are interwoven, both are required for our salvation but nothing we can do can achieve our salvation. It is always, in Peter's words, an '*appeal to God*'.

'*Appeal to God for a good conscience*', again we may mishear Peter. It is not that we are asking God for a good

conscience but rather that our good conscience, a pure heart, absolute honesty, and integrity before God, which our baptism symbolises and gives external expression too, our good conscience is the appeal to God, which saves us. We recognise we are all a work in progress.

The start of the passage from Peter's letter, may have had Pauline thought imposed upon it. The translation we use, uses the most common text that has been handed down to us, '*For Christ also suffered for sins once for all*'. However, there is a good argument for a short version found in some of the texts we have, '*For Christ too once suffered for sins*'. The additions might have been made because the scribes were so familiar with Pauline writing. It is a subtle change but, as familiar as it may seem from the creeds, we will need to tread carefully if you wish to base our theology on this verse. Peter is trying to articulate a deep mystery and we must be careful not to read more into the text than is there.

Now we come to our gospel. It is noted that Mark's gospel is brief and fast moving. In just seven verses we have, Jesus's baptism, Jesus's temptation in the wilderness, and a summary of Jesus's entire ministry. Mathew and Luke need more words than Mark just to cover Jesus's temptation in the wilderness.

If Jesus was on any kind of high having been told at His baptism, '*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased*', it didn't go to his head, he continues to be completely obedient and is driven out into the wilderness by God's Spirit. In the wilderness, you cannot escape your thoughts, one commentator noticed the absolute silence,

able to hear his heart beat, as he sat in the wilderness. And, for forty days Jesus wrestled with whatever was going on within him.

In Mark's brief version of the narrative, it seems the angels were with Jesus all along. Perhaps, in the 'wild beasts', we have a recalling of the garden of Eden, it is not clear. Even in a silent retreat is best with someone with you to watch over us in case things go wrong. God is keeping Jesus safe.

To Mark it is not important what the temptations were; we know nothing about them. The outcome of the temptations is only implicit, as we move to the section where it is obvious that Jesus is ready for His mission. We find in this the affirmation that Jesus really is *God's Son, the Beloved; with whom God is well pleased*. The temptations are affirmation of a good conscience, a pure heart, absolute honesty, and integrity before God, which had been symbolised in Christ's own baptism and revealed by God's words and the sending of the Holy Spirit.

This is what matters to Mark, that Christ really is the beloved, and this is what allows Christ to proclaim, '*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*'

Lent is a traditional season for preparing for baptism. So there is an invitation for us to reflect on our own baptism and the promises that were made. Many of us will have been baptised as infants and have little memory of our baptism but hopefully we have come to take on the promises of baptism for ourselves.

As we have grown in understanding and faith, we have sought to have a good conscience, a pure heart, absolute honesty, and integrity before God. This is what it means to take on our baptismal promises and to walk in the way of Christ.

'The time is fulfilled,' in the life of Christ God has made a new covenant with humanity. *'and the kingdom of God has come near;'* The Kingdom of God was revealed in the life of Christ, that was the first glimpse of the Kingdom, an upside down kingdom, led by a servant king, in which the remarkable claims of the beatitudes could be made and held.

'repent, and believe in the good news.' Repenting is turning around, is not just turning away from sin, it is also turning towards the light of Christ. It is placing something different at the centre of our lives that is worthy of being the focus of our lives, something that will bring fullness of life, that will heal and restore rather than wound and destroy.

We are the continuation of *'and the kingdom of God has come near;'* we have turned towards Christ, in our lives the Kingdom of God must be revealed that is our work and our task, that is the work of our baptismal promises.

Mark's fast paced narrative has its own purpose. In Christ's baptism we have the suffering servant who is also a king. We are invited to baptism, we are invited to become beloved children of God, with whom God is pleased. We are invited to receive the Holy Spirit, as did Christ.

In Jesus time in the wilderness we have further preparation for the one who comes out of the wilderness but the testing will continue throughout Christ's ministry. It is one

of the distinctive themes of Mark, the battle between good and evil. So, it is for us, there are major times of testing, we emerge to faith from the wilderness, but that is not the end of our testing, we continue to be tested. Trials are an integral part of our lives and our faith journey.

Finally, Mark makes it clear that the time is now, the kingdom is near. It was present in Christ and it is present in Christ's body today. A daunting thought, the kingdom is in us, we are custodians of that kingdom in the world, we bring the kingdom into the world.

These three readings are trying to give us multiple ways of perceiving the words that were said when we were asked on Wednesday:

Dust you are, and to dust you shall return.

Turn from sin and be faithful to the gospel.

We are dust, amazing dust, which God created from the stars as part of God's good creation. We have been offered a new covenant with God, revealed in Christ, this is a covenant of partnership, God working in and through us. This Lent may we seek to have pure hearts, absolute honesty, and integrity before God, that in our lives, others may know '*the kingdom of God has come near*'.

The work of the Kingdom will look different in each of our lives. There will be common themes but each of us has our own distinctive calling as we bring the Kingdom into the world. As we seek to fulfil our baptismal calling let us support one another as we journey with Christ to bring the Kingdom of God to all the world. Amen. Amen.