

1st Sunday Lent (B)

22nd February 2015

'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

You might be wondering what Noah has got to do with the 1st Sunday of Lent? Why do we hear that 1st reading today? Well, we hear of Noah because over the coming Sundays of Lent we'll be hearing of the various different covenants that God made with man over in the Old Testament. Next week, the covenant with Abraham; the week after, the covenant with Moses on Sinai. On the 5th Sunday of Lent, we'll hear God wonderfully speaking through Jeremiah promising a "new covenant," "written on their hearts," and that will point forward 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 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. At each stage, God takes the initiative, gradually forming a people who will know Him and love Him. It starts out brutally, as He threatens to destroy mankind; but gradually it becomes more gentle; until in Jesus Christ, God takes on Himself the very sins He's wanting to deliver man from.

Surely the key message for Lent, from this first Covenant with Noah is this: 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 man for, that God could be justified in His righteous anger ... It is 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, in effect, be an understandable reaction to the sinfulness of mankind. But the Covenant with Noah, the promise made to mankind at this point is 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 that time to ponder on 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 adult members of our parish, 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 forty days and nights of Lent with Him there, re-enlivening the promises made at our Baptism.

Lent is a time to turn to God more, to give away more, and to consume less: **prayer, almsgiving and fasting** are the three ways given to us on Ash Wednesday, the other day, 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. How important it is to have a *season* to do that in — better than a ongoing feeling that sometime I should try harder — this 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: refreshed, not flooded, with His waters ... forgiven, not condemned.