

Sunday 18th February 2024

First Sunday of Lent

FIRST Reading: Genesis 9.8-17

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between

God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.' God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'

GOSPEL: Mark 1.9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

Today, they tell me, is the first Sunday of Lent. Well that happened quick! If you made a new year's resolution and failed to keep it, Lent is a fantastic opportunity to fail at it again.

I joke, of course, but sometimes trying to give something up for Lent does feel like a bit of a futile exercise. So I want to offer you a slightly different perspective this morning.

Our reading today from Mark's gospel takes us racing through three different stories. We have the baptism of Jesus; Jesus in the wilderness; and the beginning of his ministry. All in the space of a couple of paragraphs.

I like this. Often the Bible is quite detailed and I feel I have to kind of stick to the script. (Except I quite often don't!) But today, Mark has very helpfully provided me with a few sermon notes

instead! Some room for imagination and exploration.

The people who decided our readings today paired this reading with the story of Noah. And I thought at first that the only connection really was the number 40. You know, 40 days of rain, and 40 days of wilderness. But in both cases we have a tough time, followed by a time of fruitfulness and new life.

So let's just think about that tough time for a few minutes this morning. Or maybe even our own tough times. Times when we feel isolated and confused; when we can no longer be certain of being able to be in control. What's the point? Where is God in them?

Some of you may know that I've been quite poorly for most of the winter. Even when I started to feel better I had very low energy levels. So I haven't

really done much around church for a while. And I was chatting with my daughter the other day and I said “I miss preaching... I miss feeling important!” And although I said it to make her laugh, afterwards I realised there was more than a grain of truth in it. I did miss feeling important. I missed feeling needed, and affirmed, and useful.

So what has all this got to do with Lent? Let me try and explain.

Jesus was baptized. And God told him, loudly and publicly, that he was God’s beloved son. And there was a visible sign of the Spirit of God descending. But Jesus didn’t take the win and head straight off to ministry. He went into the wilderness, alone. Why? What happened there that needed to happen before Jesus got going?

When I think of wilderness stories in the Bible, yes they are times of testing; even pain, but they are also times of encounter with God.

I think of Elijah, in the wilderness, depressed and frightened. God met him there in the sound of sheer silence.

I think of Hagar in the wilderness, rejected, alone, and afraid for her young son’s life. God met her there.

And I think of the people of Israel, led by Moses through the wilderness, learning what it meant to be the people of God; to follow and trust God’s ways. They met God there.

When I look back on being unwell this winter and feeling a bit unimportant and out of touch and not needed, I’m not sure it’s altogether a bad thing. Sometimes we need to lose our sense of self-importance. Because we need to learn, really

learn, what it means to be loved by God. These experiences take us away from the affirmation of others, remind us that we are dust, and therefore not particularly important. And that in turn opens us to receive God's unconditional love.

What if Jesus needed to completely understand that being loved by God was the most important thing? Not because of what he accomplished, but for who he was. Before he healed a single person or did a single miracle or preached a single word. What if the words he had heard God speak in public needed to land in his own heart first?

There's a difference between self-importance and self-esteem. One relies on the opinions and behaviour of others towards us, or our success in life; the other is a sense that we are infinitely precious, lovable, and loved no matter what.

Wilderness experiences come in many ways. It could be a time of being unwell. It could be the loss of a job, or retirement, or just simply getting older. In a way we try to create a little wilderness experience for ourselves in Lent. We give stuff up. We try to pray more and repent lots. It's not always that successful! But I want you to understand that a wilderness experience is an opportunity to encounter the love of God for us more deeply, because we don't have the other ways we value ourselves to rely on. Everything gets stripped away.

Father Michael shared last week about Lent being a time of drawing close to God, being aware of God's constant presence everywhere. I think it's also a time to lean more fully into the love of God for us.

When I think of the way Jesus went about ministry, I realise he wasn't showy. In fact he

seemed to tell people not to tell anyone about him. He didn't seek power or influence. And that's why I wonder if in the wilderness he discovered more deeply what it meant to be God's son, the Beloved. Did it prepare him for ministry?

So this Lent, in this time of preparation for Easter joy, I want to encourage you to seek God's love for you more deeply. How you do that is up to you. Some of you will have familiar ways you connect with the divine. But some of you might be thinking I don't know where to start. How do I get God's love from my head to my heart? It's a journey. And we, much like God's people journeying in the wilderness, are quite prone to self-sabotage.

So I'm going to offer you a couple of practical starting points, which might be helpful.

The first is something I call one word prayers. Prayer is hard work. Or it is for me anyway and I suspect for a lot of people. I don't really find silence helps me, although I know it helps a lot of people, but my brain is too busy for silence. And I have problems saying lots of words. I always seem to end up telling God what to do, bringing my own agenda, as though I can somehow control life or know what's best.

So I experimented with being silent, but bringing my wayward thoughts to God in one word. It might be someone or something I'm worried about. Or something I'm particularly thankful for. Whatever pops into your head! There's a song we used to sing: I stand, I stand in awe of you; and I'll let my words be few.

So let your words be few, and allow the Holy Spirit to breathe into whatever is on your mind. It's simple. And it's prayer.

The second possible starting point I learned from an author called Elizabeth Gilbert, who wrote the book 'Eat, Pray, Love'.

She developed a spiritual practice of writing herself letters from Love. And, as we all know, God is actually Love! God is complete unconditional love that sets a universe in motion, and cares completely about the specks of dust that we are in that universe. Love that lives in the ordinary and the completely mind-blowing!

Elizabeth starts with the question "What would love have me know today?" And then she writes a letter to herself. She's developed an online community where different people can share their letters. But what you write is actually not for other people to read, it's for you. The idea is not to think too much, or refine what you write. Don't worry about spelling or grammar. And if you can,

write with a pen and paper rather than a keyboard.

So I tried it. And I'm going to read you part of a letter I wrote, not for you to copy, just so you can get a sense of what it might look like.

(For the purposes of the published version of this sermon I include a link below to Elizabeth Gilbert's website, for you to see examples).

<https://elizabethgilbert.substack.com>

I know some of you might have difficulties with written words and writing, in which case, why don't you try recording it on your phone? Or express it in other creative ways?

Length isn't important. My shortest letter from Love was just two words: I understand.

I was surprised by what came out of just being in that place of listening to the voice of love. How

moving it was. How it made me feel like the God of Love was speaking directly to my heart.

At the very least, even if you don't attribute anything of God to it, it's a way of learning to speak gently and lovingly to yourself rather than telling yourself off. And many of us need that.

Seeking to live more deeply in an awareness of God's complete unconditional love for you is not self-indulgence. You might think it is, because it's not how we traditionally understand Lent. This is a much needed time of preparation for new growth, for us personally, and also more widely. It allows us to be less self-centered, not more. Less defensive; less easily offended. It's actually preparation for us to share God's love with others; because we can only share what we know. And we're here to be loved and to love.

Amen.