

LENT 1B 21-02-2021 The Reverend Lorna Green

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.'

1 Peter 3.18-22

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

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 for 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's Bible readings evoke a multitude of images, pictures that might help or hinder our understanding of the scripture. God speaks to us through all our senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. Our senses alert us to what is spoiled, bad or harmful, and identify what is good and beautiful.

When we hear the story of Noah and the great flood, we might picture a nursery illustration or model of an ark and animals. None of us were alive, of course, when Noah was around, and we have no pictures of the ark; so we imagine what it might have looked like.

We have, however, all seen a rainbow in the sky. We can easily picture a rainbow because we have seen many during our lives. The ancients thought lightning was arrows that God shot from heaven to the earth; and if you have arrows, you need a bow- the rainbow. The rainbow is depicted as an everlasting reminder to us of God's promise: the first ever covenant or promise God made to humans, to never again destroy the earth by flood.

Psalm 25 says, 'Teach me your paths', and 'All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness'; so the image of a pathway or road comes to mind. We might picture a sunny country lane, or a long, straight, outback road; or maybe a steep mountain path, strewn with boulders and difficult to travel. Perhaps it depends on where and how we feel our own life-journeys are going.

If we skip to the gospel, we hear the familiar story of John baptising Jesus in the river; so we might picture cool water and twinkling sunlight. How do we picture the Holy Spirit? 'Like a dove' the Spirit descends, and doves are gentle little birds; but this dove tears open the heavens, and then drives Jesus into the wilderness.

How do we picture wilderness? Do we see, in our mind's eye, a desert complete with sand dunes, or a rocky, wild, windswept landscape with stunted trees and bushes? This wilderness is dangerous, because wild animals live there; this is no sheltered, quiet retreat for Jesus.

We heard a section from the first letter of Peter, which was written after the gospel according to Mark. We don't know who the writer was, but it almost certainly was not the Apostle Peter; in ancient times, authorship wasn't as important as we think it is today and writings could be attributed to people from the past.

This section of the letter is about the person and work of Jesus, and sounds almost like a resume, or a Readers Digest Condensed version! It answers questions that were not written down for us, so we must deduce the questions from the answers. These verses seem to be answering the question: "Who is Jesus, and what does he mean to me?"

We can spend our lives asking the question, "Who is Jesus, and what does he mean to me?" It's a question we SHOULD all ask, so we can grow, mature, and discover more about our identity as Christians.

The letter of Peter tells us that Jesus suffered and died in order to bring us to God. In response, we are baptised, and are given a place in the new world- God's kingdom.

Why is suffering so important? Why did Jesus have to suffer? Come to think of it- why do WE suffer?

Suffering is inevitable for us because we are fragile creatures living in a volatile world. Our bodies break down and malfunction, so physical suffering happens; and we have accidents, sometimes putting ourselves in harm's way.

We suffer emotionally and psychologically: sometimes because our brains malfunction, but more often because of bereavement and grief, disappointment, and all the losses we experience during our lives.

The fact that Jesus suffered is important because it demonstrates his humanity; it means we have a God who feels as we do, who KNOWS what we experience.

Because Jesus was raised from the dead and exalted, we know that he has overcome suffering and death; and his promise is that he will accompany us in our suffering, through our death and beyond.

As we begin the season of Lent, it is fitting that we reflect on the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness. Whatever soul-searching, loneliness and fear we have ever experienced- Jesus has been there too and is with us during our wilderness times.

If we choose to give up things we enjoy for Lent, like chocolate or wine, the point is not to make ourselves suffer or feel deprived. The point is to give ourselves the space to focus on Jesus, to use our imagination, our intellect, even our daydreams, to enter into our own Lenten experience.

This week the long and dismal story of the effect of our country's immigration policies continued as yet another court case took place involving Priya, Nades, and their two Australian-born daughters. They remain imprisoned on Christmas Island.

We also heard the shocking story of the assault on a young woman in a minister's office in Parliament House- the seat of our government in Canberra.

Then on Thursday, Facebook decided to censor what Australians can see on their social media platform, taking down important information from government institutions like the Bureau of Meteorology and the Department of Fire and Emergency. Some pages have been reinstated; some have not.

All these situations- and many more- speak of the misuse and abuse of power. People with power making decisions that can destroy other people. Our world needs a better way to be.

Let's not forget that we too make choices that cause suffering to others, directly or indirectly. The things we buy or throw away, the government we elect- our choices have an impact on the wider world.

We begin Holy Week in five weeks' time, when we will remember and focus on the last week of Jesus' earthly life. We need to experience Lent and Holy Week deliberately and intentionally if we are to truly appreciate the joyous victory of Easter Day. There is no Easter without Good Friday.

As we begin our journey through Lent, let's use our imaginations to consider what we can do better. Let's give ourselves time and space to reflect, to repent, and to be ready for Jesus.

The Lord be with you.