

LENT 1 -2021
Gen 9:8-15
1Pet 3:18-22
Mk 1:12-15

In Australia we are used to fires and floods, both of which can be devastating as well as cleansing. Noah and his family were saved from a flood and when it subsided, God made a covenant with him, his family and every living creature and the earth itself. His promise was that he would not destroy the earth again whatever the cost to himself or the intransigence of humans. The sign of the covenant was the rainbow indicating that God has put away his weapon of war and has promised peace and safety for all living things. In return, Noah was to care for the earth and all life. He was to be an environmentalist and Pro-Life!

Noah's rescue from the Flood is used as a type of Christian baptism in the epistle of St Peter. This epistle was written to those who were preparing for baptism during the period of the persecution of Christians around 60AD. The message to the candidates was that in baptism disciples are not saved *from* water but *through* water. As God promised Noah his mercy, loving assurance and peace, so this same promise is made to them as they battle against evil and the chaos it creates in the world.

Today's gospel also reminds us of God's promise to Noah that he would protect his people no matter what the cost to himself might be. St Mark tells us that the combatants in the war between good and evil were lined up. On one hand there is Jesus, God's agent and on the other there is Satan, leader of the resistance to the reign of God. Mark tells us that after his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit was driven into the wilderness, the place of temptation. This is no gentle push, the Greek word used for 'driven' gives us the word 'ballistic.'

Mark tells us nothing about the temptations except that like Elijah fleeing from Jezebel, angels ministered to him and like Daniel in the lions' den (Dan 6:16ff), Jesus was not harmed by the wild beasts. These were signs of God's protection and the hearers of Mark would have expected that the long-awaited reign of God was about to dawn.

Jesus began his ministry by saying, "The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom is at hand. Repent and believe the gospel" (Mk 1:15). Repentance means more than feeling sorry, it means a complete change of mindset from the one that normally operates in the world. All Jesus asks is that we find life by losing it, and that doesn't necessarily mean martyrdom, it means abandoning our self-centred life and developing a God centred life. To be a disciple we must be a servant and committed to God whatever the cost. Above all we must persevere to the end.

The foundation of Jesus' ministry was prayer. He would recite the Jewish daily prayers as we say Matins and Evensong. He would attend the synagogue as we attend mass. These prayers are important but their power depends on the love that is generated in personal prayer within the heart of each believer. Without Christ we can do nothing (Jn 15:5). Love of God and others must be learned and it is in prayer that this learning occurs. How can we

love each other if we do not love God (1 Jn 4:20)? The suffering of our purification begins in our learning to love.

St Augustine said, "Without God, we cannot. Without us, God will not." God never abandons anyone and wishes all to be saved but he uses people to reach out to other people. People of prayer who are shedding their self-centredness and becoming Christ-like are motivated to live and share the gospel inviting others to 'come and see.' If prayer puts God to work on earth, then prayerlessness rules God out of the world's affairs and prevents him from working. It is possible to judge the health of a parish community by its prayerfulness and contemplative spirit. This means that the health of our community is determined by the individual health of its members. So the question our readings raise today is, 'How healthy is each of us spiritually?'

Lent is here. Let us make it one of spiritual strengthening – the growth of the Kingdom depends on each one of us, and if not us, then who?

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