

LENTEN PRAYER: CHRIST CHAT



FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT YEAR B

Sunday 18th February 2024

FIRST READING

A reading from the book of Genesis

God spoke to Noah and his sons, 'See, I establish my Covenant with you, and with your descendants after you; also with every living creature to be found with you, birds, cattle and every wild beast with you: everything that came out of the ark, everything that lives on the earth. I establish my Covenant with you: no thing of flesh shall be swept away again by the waters of the flood. There shall be no flood to destroy the earth again.'

God said, 'Here is the sign of the Covenant I make between myself and you and every living creature with you for all generations: I set my bow in the clouds and it shall be a sign of the Covenant between me and the earth. When I gather the clouds over the earth and the bow appears in the clouds, I will recall the Covenant between myself and you and every living creature of every kind. And so the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all things of flesh.'

SECOND READING

A reading from the first letter of St Peter

Christ himself, innocent though he was, died once for sins, died for the guilty, to lead us to God. In the body he was put to death, in the spirit he was raised to life, and, in the spirit, he went to preach to the spirits in prison. Now it was long ago, when Noah was still building that ark which saved only a small group of eight people 'by water', and when God was still waiting patiently, that these spirits refused to believe. That water is a type of the baptism which saves you now, and which is not the washing off of physical dirt but a pledge made to God from a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has entered heaven and is at God's right hand, now that he has made the angels and Dominations and Powers his subjects.

GOSPEL

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

The Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness and he remained there for forty days, and was tempted by Satan. He was with the wild beasts, and the angels looked after him.

After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee. There he proclaimed the Good News from God. 'The time has come' he said 'and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News.'

Gospel Reflection

The First Reading, from Genesis, and the Gospel this week need to be looked at together. In the Genesis reading, God has just wiped clean the earth and is ready to re-establish the relationship with humanity through Noah and his family. In the short gospel passage, Jesus enters the wilderness as a time of preparation and renewal, ready to embark on his mission of re-establishing the relationship between God and humanity. In both readings there is a sense of a fresh start – a clean slate – for humankind. It is a clear indication of God's commitment to humanity, even when we have totally distanced ourselves from God and forgotten about keeping up our part of the relationship, God is willing to make a clean start of it all again. Both readings offer a reminder of God's constant desire for us to be in right relationship with God and with the world. The presence of Jesus in the world was as clear a signal as the rainbow in the sky that God was willing to give us another go – give us a chance to again see God with new eyes and new understanding.

In the gospel passage, we have a picture of Jesus preparing himself for his public ministry. He takes himself out into the wilderness, away from all that he has known until this time, to reflect on his life so far and this next vital stage that he is about to enter. In the wilderness, Jesus is tempted. He has to face his own doubts and demons before he sets off on the road of his public ministry. When he leaves the desert wilderness and enters back into Galilee he immediately begins to preach and, in the first words accredited to him in this gospel, Jesus announces that the kingdom of God is at hand and it's time to repent and believe. It's a call to open your eyes and get with the program!

Have you thought? Temptation?

When we adopt a view of Jesus as the Son of God, it is hard to imagine him even facing temptation, let alone the possibility of him giving in to it. However, when we see Jesus as also being fully human, we realise that he was just as likely to face temptation as we are. But what might have tempted Jesus? Was he tempted to simply go back to his life in Joseph's carpentry business and not respond to God's call? Was he tempted to display his power in flashy demonstrations for all to see? Was he tempted to despair at what lay ahead of him?

Living the Gospel – Change of heart

Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God is a call to live out God's transformative dream of right relationship with one another and with our world. To accept this call requires a change of heart and mind (a metanoia) and the adoption of a new orientation, a new worldview based on living the kingdom of God. This is a challenge to be counter-cultural – to go 'against the flow' of the majority attitudes at times. It is certainly not an 'easy option' that we are called to live. Jesus' call to 'repent and believe' is a very appropriate call to begin the Lenten season.

Historical Context – The Wilderness

The Jordan Valley was a relatively fertile area. However, Jesus would not have had to travel too great a distance to find himself in very arid, desert-like wilderness. Crossing the River Jordan and climbing out of the Jordan Valley to the east, Jesus would have emerged onto the northern part of the TransJordan Plateau and the edge of the Syrian Desert. The area was not only geographically rough but it was also full of bandits and rebels. It was a dangerous place to be. However, the desert wilderness holds great significance in the Bible as a place of preparation for a new stage of life or a new relationship with God.

Questions for Adolescents

1. Why was it necessary for Jesus to go out into the wilderness before he began his public ministry?
2. What did Jesus mean when he said, 'The kingdom of God is at hand'?
3. What times of your life would you describe as 'desert times'?
4. What does it mean to you to know that Jesus was capable of being tempted?
5. How can you use Lent as a time to respond to the call to 'Repent and believe the Good News'?

Questions for Adults

1. What does the image of the wilderness mean to you?
2. When have you felt that you were in a desert period of your life?
3. How do you prepare yourself for something that you know is going to be challenging?
4. In what areas of your life do you need to see someone or something with 'new eyes'?
5. What are the signs that the kingdom of God is still close at hand?

Learning moments

- What are some examples of humankind not being in right relationship with God and with the world? Use clippings from newspapers, magazines and other images to construct a visual concept map of ways in which we are not acting out of right relationship with God and the natural environment.
- Lent is a season of preparation looking towards the celebration of Easter. Traditionally, people 'prepared themselves' by making sacrifices or giving up certain activities or foods for the period of Lent. Prepare a personal list of ways in which you can use this season effectively to prepare for the Easter celebration.
- Write a prayer in response to the call to make a change of heart and mind during Lent. Use the prayer during the weeks leading up to Easter.