

## First Sunday in Lent 2021

*Genesis 9:8-17. Psalm 25:1-10. 1 Peter 3:18-22. Mark 1:9-15*

Last Wednesday before I placed ash on foreheads: I spoke about the ancient practices of the Church, Lent, I said, was a time for preparation for Baptism. I invited the congregation to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy word.' I didn't say 'give up chocolate or booze' No, in this Year B the focus for keeping a holy Lent will be the renewal of our baptismal covenant.

Over recent weeks we have been considering how we might we celebrate Holy Week and Easter. After the success of our Lessons and Music at Christmastide we thought something similar for the Easter Vigil. A service in which by the light of the Paschal Candle we might hear anew the readings which speak of our salvation, alongside music to help us consider these great events in our sacred history. When I began to reflect on these readings I was reminded once again that I was reading about God's engagement with the great figures of Biblical history and importantly the covenants he offered to them: Abraham, Noah, Moses. We heard a portion one of the readings this morning the covenant between God and Noah. More than once the writer of this passage of Genesis stresses: 'I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh.' Our salvation has been by won by covenant with God.

A piece of music that is being considered is 'Four Serious Songs' by Brahms. I had a nagging feeling that I had read of this piece and when I googled it I realised that it had featured briefly in EM Forster's novel *Howards End*. IN the book dealing as it does with matters of class and wealth in Edwardian England. three of the main characters are at a concert hall – where they are listening to Brahms. There is confusion over an umbrella which brings together folk of different status and in midst of the confusion one of the characters says: 'To trust people is a luxury in which only the wealthy can indulge; the poor cannot afford it.'

On Friday evening I suggested to you that gathering and enjoying ourselves even in Lent was not really such a wicked thing, particularly in our day when so many have endured the effects of prolonged lockdowns and the fear of pandemic. I recall speaking to group of soldiers in Afghanistan on the first Sunday of Lent and suggesting to them that giving up something was not always what we are called to do. Indeed in their situation I would strongly recommend they did not give up any more than they already had. In fact I suggested they did something that would feed, nourish their spirits. We were living in a wilderness of Biblical proportions, all around us it seemed was threat and living in a constant state of fear, being constantly hyper alert is a sure recipe for ongoing psychological problems. It was so important that we found time to rest, to completely relax and I suggested to them that to immerse themselves in lives of prayer, contemplation would be something of a panacea. The base was constantly guarded and there were always teams of guardian angels watching. We had to learn to rest as it where under the shelter of their wings.

So in Lent it is perhaps not always giving up something that is our first calling. Can I suggest that if we do, it should be something that we might sense our reliance on, something we might ordinarily might turn to, perhaps take for granted. But what is more important is a new way of thinking: in what or whom do you place your trust, in what or whom do you have complete confidence? In what or whom do you rest secure? Perhaps this is what Lent is truly about, and perhaps our readings today helps get another perspective on this season other than the simply penitential. The theme is set by the Psalmist *In you, O Lord my God, have I put my hope: in you have I trusted, let me not be ashamed, nor let my enemies triumph over me.*

Our rather short sharp account of the wilderness in Mark's gospel doesn't give us much and we can't but help but think of the longer accounts in Matthew and Luke. But nonetheless there is sense that in this wilderness Jesus is called to contemplate on what or whom does he place his trust, hence they are not strictly temptations, much more correctly they are trials and so it is with us in this season.

In this season we are called to a trial, a test: in what or whom do we place our trust? We live in an affluent nation, we can indeed afford the luxury of trusting in people, and it is right that we should, but what of those we might broadly call the poor. This is where our New Testament reading is important. Let me quote from Dr Colin Dundon's reflections on this reading he begins tellingly: *Read this passage and if you are not puzzled, read it again.* Dr Colin goes on: *Peter is addressing the very real threat of suffering from the political authorities, whether they be local or higher up the political scale. The Christians in Northern and Central Turkey know that this can happen any time. So how do they respond? With violence, fear, sullen silence, telling a lie to save their skins, abuse of their persecutors? Well, no. Throughout this letter Peter gives various responses to the question and this is one of them.*

We are back to the question of Covenant. Peter calls on his hearers to trust in the covenants that God offers in spite of the inevitable persecution. He calls on them to trust the baptismal covenant into which they are one with God in Christ – baptized into his death, indeed. And thereby hangs the essence of our Lenten observance, do we trust in God despite the difficulty that it brings: the awkwardness, the criticism, the incredulity of many? Are we at one with those for whom persecution is a daily occurrence?

Prayer, fasting and alms giving are disciplines which form a part of our trial. I hope that we can be creative with our disciplines and find in them the means whereby we, out of our abundance, can come alongside for whom poverty is more than simply material but also involves the freedoms we take for granted. That we can pray for those who suffer persecution and in luxury of trust we enjoy we might contemplate our baptismal covenant, in which our trust truly lies and which we will renew on Easter morning. Amen.