

Lent is About Jesus

First Sunday in Lent, Year B, 18 February 2024

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

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

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Do you remember the first creation story at the start of Genesis, with the Spirit of God moving on the waters? And do you remember your book of children's bible stories, with a picture of Noah on his ark sending out a dove over the waters? Well, all this is what's going on in today's Gospel reading. There's Jesus in the waters of his baptism, with God's Spirit descending on him. The creation is beginning again, giving the world yet another chance; a new creation is dawning in Jesus Christ.

And this Spirit descends like a dove, like Noah's dove, looking over the waters of chaos and judgement for a place of safety and hope—the place that Christians have found in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ the covenant with Noah from our Genesis reading, a covenant blessing the whole creation, man and beast, and giving a traumatised world something to hope for, is most profoundly revealed. The hope in God's goodness that's celebrated in Psalm 25 today is confirmed for us in Jesus Christ.

But wait, as they say, there's more. There's another Old Testament echo in today's Gospel. Jesus comes up from the water to be driven by God's Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days, just as Israel came up from the Red Sea waters to begin its 40 years' Exodus journey in the wilderness. Here in the wilderness, where Israel failed God again and again in those Exodus stories, Jesus, the new Israel, did not fail. Here, in the language of our 1 Peter reading, the righteous acts for the unrighteous. And here, friends, in a world of evil and ready capitulation to its temptations, Jesus was revealed as the sinless one—that is, as the one never at odds with God, and never separated from God, as his Resurrection and Ascension most profoundly testify.

I remember a confirmation class for young adults when I was Rector of Manuka, where a bright ANU maths student queried whether Jesus really was sinless. How could he truly understand the human condition if he'd never experienced it all, especially sin? Hers was a good question. I replied that those who face temptations yet who don't give in are the ones who *most fully* understand the human condition. They're mindful enough to see through the false promises of our typical temptations, and self-aware enough to recognise their own self-deceptions—that is, they're the most clear-eyed.

So, the sinless Jesus, with the Christian saints who share in Jesus' holiness, are the most fully human ones. They're also the most truly *humane* ones, the most truly empathic ones, not at all piously off-putting. And hence they offer us not only solidarity in our temptations but concrete help in getting through them and past them (that young ANU maths student is now a parish priest in Grafton Diocese, by the way, in case you were wondering how that confirmation class turned out).

What we have in today's Gospel, then, reveals the heart of Christian faith, hope and love. It comes with *believing in* Jesus Christ, not just having opinions about him—with believing in his centrality, in his all-sufficiency; believing that if we can't do it, he'll help us; believing that if we can't bear it, he'll bear it with us.

Indeed, if we can't hold up under the greatest burden of our beliefless age, the burden of having to ground meaning and purpose entirely within ourselves (though with spirituality or even Church perhaps providing us with some resources for our project of self-creation), then we can turn instead to Jesus, who picks us up and stands us on our feet to give us more rather than less strength, more rather than less personal agency.

So, instead of we ourselves as the subject of our lives, with Jesus as an object to which we might or might not look, Jesus himself becomes the subject of our lives while we become his object. Instead of Jesus providing us with some spiritual resources, then, we the baptised become his spiritual resources. Because, friends, the world's spiritual magnetic field reverses itself in baptism. Jesus Christ becomes our new centre and we become our truest selves in his orbit, in his service.

In light of which we must not underrate the Eucharist. We can't just see it as a personal quiet space, even as an opportunity for opening our hearts to God. Because, primarily, here in the Eucharist God opens his heart to us, seeking us and finding us in Jesus Christ so that we can more truly seek and find God in the living out of our Christian lives.

Now, these claims about Jesus will have their critics, even in solid Anglican pews. Here there's too much Jesus, too much that's definite, too much that sounds exclusive and dismissive of worthwhile spiritual alternatives. Well, I have thought about such challenges—a lot. Back in the day I did my doctoral dissertation on the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ in late-20th century Christian thought, so that for years I explored the question of how our faith in Jesus works. And especially in an era when historians raise doubts about the gospels, while alternative religious possibilities confront us not just overseas but down the street, in the office, in the classroom and, for some of us, around the family table for Christmas dinner.

For now, let me highlight two things about Christianity's claim to represent the fullness of truth—not definitive things, certainly, but I hope suggestive ones.

Remember our Genesis story about Noah today. The covenant restored by God after the flood isn't narrowly conceived, it's not just for the people of God. Rather, it's for the whole world, for all creatures—the firm centre of our faith has soft edges.

Likewise, in our 1 Peter reading today, and for the only time in our whole New Testament, we hear about Holy Saturday and Jesus' descent to the dead: the legend of his preaching to the souls in prison—that is, to the disobedient who perished in Noah's flood. This is a story of grace, of inclusion and of second chances. Ours isn't an exclusive Jesus for superior insiders, then. The Church's claims for Jesus need not be seen as an affront to the secular mood of Enlightenment tolerance that underpins many of our Western values. Indeed, if we have some tolerance and inclusion in our world today it's largely because of Jesus Christ, and the non-violent, non-vengeful, world-embracing God that Jesus reveals at Easter, at Ascension and Pentecost. Here we see just what type of reality it is that now spreads its arms across our whole rainbow world—a force of love, bearing the face of Jesus Christ.

So, to any sceptics present I say this: that the particularity of Jesus is a blessing not a curse. If Jesus displaces us and our egos at the centre of our lives, so that he becomes the subject of our lives and not we ourselves, then we find neither autonomy nor heteronomy but instead an authentic humanism. All of which recalls our Lenten calling, which is to let go of frivolous alternatives and prepare for the adventure of Easter.

The Lord be with you ...