
LENTEN STUDIES

YEAR B

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FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR B

Genesis 9.8–17; Psalm 25.1–10; 1 Peter 3.18–22; Mark 1.9–15.

Once again we walk our way to the cross and resurrection and in the time we spend on the road we explore the meaning of our lives, the way that Jesus' call to discipleship challenges us in our world, and the resources the living Lord and his spirit bring to us.

These little studies are based on the Sunday readings and you might like to use them in your meditations and prayers throughout the week during Lent.

Our journey begins at the end, the finale of the Flood story. So, while it is a text of great promise and comfort, without the heartbreaking account of the Flood and the events leading up to we are left puzzled and pass on to what we might think of as more important things. After all we have read this text in the fractured story-telling of children's books and I even have a piece of fine china depicting it in glorious colour.

The theme of the Flood story is the troubled, even dysfunctional, relationship between creation and the Creator. The story begins with high hopes. God calls into being his covenant partners (human beings) to create a world of unity, harmony, goodness and delight. But the covenant partners are restless and recalcitrant and resistant to these purposes seeking other hopes that allow for the exercise of power and self-interest. Thus the purposes of the very one by whom, in whom and for whom the world exists is cast aside.

The Flood lies at the centre of this tragedy as the great disruption of creation. Power, self-interest and the passion to fulfil any desire at any cost wreak their havoc. Hence the Flood, a powerful symbolic presentation of chaos that overwhelms the world and threatens its very existence. The fracture between creation's covenant partners and the Creator is in total and chaotic disarray and world sinks slowly into catastrophic decline and destruction. Is this the end of the great experiment?

Read on.

Genesis 9.8–17

⁸Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰and 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. ¹¹I 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.' ¹²God 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: ¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I 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. ¹⁶When 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.’ ¹⁷God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.’

On this side of the reading everything has changed. Before you read on ask yourself, how has it changed?

Perhaps the following might help your meditation.

If you read Genesis 8.21 you will see that the Creator makes a dim assessment of the human heart. The chaos that the wild human heart has brought about remains just as troubling as it had been. It appears that human beings cannot transcend self-interest, and especially the lust for power and the

destruction that means for other human beings and the created order. Freud spelled out our self-delusions and Marx skewered us with his analysis of self-interest and power more recently.

In this situation the Creator knows that whatever our delusions might be we cannot save ourselves. So God’s great grief that his covenant partners cannot be trusted is now absorbed in and outpoured from grace. God will not let go. The new creation begins (Genesis 9.1–7). The role of human beings is to enhance, celebrate and dignify the creation as God’s covenant partners. Most especially, the sanctity of human life is raised to a level so high that is breathtaking. God is violated in the violation of a human being. Each is of ultimate value.

God makes a covenant to that effect. Renewal of humans and the created order to the highest dignity is the purpose is now God’s purpose. Not retribution or anger but from God’s grieving heart, grace. ‘Never again’ are the most significant words of promise in this story. God remembers that ‘never again’ no matter what. God’s unwavering commitment to his covenant partners springs from grace. The story of the Flood and its outcomes is the basis of the rest of the storyline in the Bible to Jesus and beyond. We will come back to it.

“Never again.” Will you keep this thought throughout Lent?

Meditate on “...I will require a reckoning for each human life.” (9.5) and “...for in his own image god made humankind” (9.6)

So, having reflected on God’s grief at the destructive behaviour of his human covenant partners, his grace in longing for a renewed beginning of creation and the renewed covenant with his partners in creation (Noah and family) we respond in the prayer of Psalm 25.

We only read the first half of the prayer in our readings but if you had time you might like to read all twenty-two verses. It has twenty-two verses because it is an acrostic so each verse begins with succeeding letters of the Hebrew alphabet (22 letters). So the thoughts of this prayer don't follow one another in a logical fashion but in a way shaped by the poetic form. Sometimes that can seem like repetition to us but to the ancient writer it was a way of treating a theme by springing surprises and creating new connections.

As you read and pray see if you can find themes, words or ideas that form connections or respond to the story of Noah.

Psalm 25.1–10

Of David.

¹To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. ²O my God, in you I trust;

do not let me be put to shame;

do not let my enemies exult over me.

³Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;

let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

⁴Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths.

⁵Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.

⁶Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.

⁷Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;

according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD!

⁸Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

⁹He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.

¹⁰All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

I found ideas like remember, forgiveness, covenant, mercy, covenant love or faithfulness, we can't save ourselves. Maybe we could add the shame that Noah and his family faced as they waited on God with a useless boat in the backyard.

This prayer sets foundations for Lenten meditation and prayer as we seek to be faithful covenant partners with God as disciples of Jesus. Take some time and pray the prayer for yourself and make it your own. Reflect on where it led you and some things that you discovered.

Did you notice how the prayer began? Do you find prayer an act holding your life and your conscious identity in outstretched hands to God? The psalmist is declaring that her life depends completely and only on God. Did you notice the other words she uses to express her prayer relationship with God; I trust, I wait, I take refuge, teach me?

The theme that stands out for me is “Teach me”. Reflect on verses 4–5, 8–9, 12.

The generation of the Flood proved unteachable and the reasons seems to be that the human heart does not want to be weaned from its ambitions, its delusions, its prejudices and led towards its true purpose to be God’s covenant partner in a world of delight, beauty, goodness, justice, unity and harmony.

What God teaches is not rule-keeping but insight into the divine mystery of what God is doing in the world. That is called discernment or guidance and discernment comes through friendship with God in prayer (read verse 14). Discernment comes from engagement with God in the context of the world of conflict about us (note that the psalmist tells us she lives in the midst of violence, danger and opposition), and the knowledge of our own limitations and failings.

Pray the prayer again.

Read this passage and if you are not puzzled read it again. But first read verse 17 because it gives us the context of Peter’s conversation with his readers/hearers.

1 Peter 3.18–22

¹⁷“For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil.”

Read on

¹⁸For 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, ¹⁹in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰who 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. ²¹And 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, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

Now ask what question is this passage in Peter’s letter addressing? The clue is in verses 17–18. 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 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.

So as a first step make a note of the things that seem clear to you.

To me the two things that are clear is first, that the Messiah was put to death violently at the hands of politicians and power elites bent on keeping their stranglehold on their status and power. The powers put him to death. They wished him dead so they could rule in violence uninterrupted and without opposition. But the messiah's suffering changed everything; forgiveness and reconciliation flowed and world became new. Just like Noah's day.

Second, the last part of verse 21 and verse 22 tells the end of the story. Violent death set free the Messiah's resurrection because he was made alive in the spirit (18). The Messiah rules the cosmos including the shadowy world that lies behind the violent and powerful , egging them on to push the boundaries of their desire to destroy God's created life to its limits. They are broken relics.

Now as a second step make a note of the puzzling ideas in 19.20, and 21.

They are supposed to be part of Peter's answer to the questions he poses but how do they answer the question? I find the following four strange ideas; after his death Jesus made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, these spirits had been disobedient in Noah's day, Noah's building of an Ark to rescue his family points to baptism and lastly, baptism is less about washing clean and more about appeal to God of a good conscience. How do these fit? What job are they doing? What do they mean?

Who or what are these spirits in prison, what was Jesus' proclamation and why the segue to Noah? Maybe we need a little bit of local light fiction from the first century. It's a book called 1 Enoch and it tells the story of God's future liberating victory over the wicked beings of Genesis 6 who in the time of Noah had rebelled against God their creator and began interfering in human society, somewhat lustily according to Genesis (6.1-8).

Peter is saying the victory over these dark forces has been won through the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus. They are judged and their power broken in the human sphere. That is what Jesus, alive in the spirit, proclaimed to them. So be encouraged when the local forces come after you. They may seem powerful, even driven by shadowy forces but they are done for.

The story of the rescue of people and the beginning of creation all over again at the time of Noah through water (a flood) it is a fairly obvious picture of baptism. Baptism is like a recipe, a complex mixture of ingredients that work together to produce a delightful outcome. Two of the ingredients are considered here. Baptism is a boundary marker for the Christian community. In baptism we pledge our lifelong primary allegiance to Messiah Jesus crucified, risen and ruling. It says to the persecutors and their political overlords that they are not lord and saviour.

But there is another ingredient. Baptism provides the ground, through the forgiveness of our sins, for a good conscience which means that when the locals come calling with their lynch mob the disciple need not be ashamed. They are baptised disciples of the One who lives.

These strange (to us) ideas really do fit together and encourage Christian folk in real danger to live their lives always in the presence of the living God.

What encouragement do you find in this passage? Reflect on that.

We now return to more familiar material; the temptations of Jesus.

Mark 1.9–15

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’

¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’

Now isn't that short and sharp story-telling? No information about Jesus' lineage or birth, no description of the dialogue between Jesus and Satan. Jesus turns up from Nazareth to the Jordan and no elaboration on why he is baptised by John. John is arrested and removed. Why and by whom? We will find out answers to some of these questions but Mark wants us to focus.

What do you think he wants his reader to pay attention to? Take time to reflect on that and ask yourself whether Mark's focus shapes your life.

In Mark's story-telling Jesus moves from off-stage (1–13), through a sideshow on the Jordan River then slowly towards centre stage. But centre stage is crowded with power hungry politicians, their legal and intellectual hangers-on, the poor, the greedy, the sick, the dying, the ambitious, the confused, an uncontrollable world of shadows, and the debunkers: In other words, the market place of human life.

Now we the readers need to know, above the babble of human noise and need that is Mark's Gospel, (just in case it gets lost in that noise and need), what this story is all about.

What do you hear before Mark takes us on his breathtaking plunge into the human melee? Read the baptism story again. What is curious about it? What little clues are thrown out to engage the reader? What does your baptism mean to you? Be honest

with yourself. Can this passage help you? Read verse 11 quietly and slowly and put your own name in there. What do you discover?

Now read the temptation story. Jesus moves from the sideshow on the River to an even more remote sideshow in the desert. It's a story full of curious clues. What are they telling me? How does this interlude help Jesus in the so-called 'real world'? How does it help me in my 'real world'?

From sideshow into the 'real world' (1.14–15). Jesus mounts the stage and seems to speak in riddles. What is the good news? What time? Near, how near, where, when? Repent? From what?

Once again note your own reflections. Pray them through using Psalm 25. Here are some reflections of mine.

I often use Mark's story of the baptism when I speak at baptisms because it is short and sharp and speaks to the human heart. When Jesus is baptised he comes as Messiah (see 1–13) our representative. In his humanity He repents of the whole human opposition to God's purposes to restore the created order and becomes God's covenant partner. He takes us with him so that everything God says to him God says to us. "You are my dearest child, I love you passionately and I am delighted with you." We will have to wait until the end of the story to find out how that can be.

No angry, grumpy grandpa of a God sitting in the attic complaining and shouting put-downs at his children.

Instead this God simply opens up his space (the heavens torn apart) and there he is in the Spirit lovingly enfolding us.

For Jesus his baptism was also his calling. He is called as God's great Covenant Partner to renew the world. He is the son on whom the creative spirit rests. These are all little clues from the Bible (Isaiah 42.1, Isaiah 64.1, Isaiah 11.1–2, Psalm 2.7 and Genesis 1.2). We'll see how this works out in 'real life' in the rest of the Gospel but our reading from 1 Peter has given us a few clues.

But of course the shadowy beings, noted in Noah's story and 1 Peter are never far away and their first step is to deflect the whole project of restoration to their destructive ends. Vocation is met with deflection; it's all too hard and there are better things to do.

But we can take heart. The beloved (you and me in Jesus) defeats the Satan's deflections, the heavenly host assure us that the father loves us and the wild animals are peace-loving. Jesus truly is the Called One to be God's covenant partner in renewing the world and we are in him.

We will only find out about John in chapter 6. For the moment he is gone. What will happen to God's purpose? The centre stage with the old story and a new twist.

Suddenly the old story meandering its way through history, sometimes almost lost and overgrown, becomes focussed. God's long promised rule was now beginning. It was here on centre stage in this unknown figure Jesus. The good news is about HIM (Mark 1.1). That's how near it is. They have to trust that. That's a big ask. This call is not about religious reformation or moral betterment. It's about trusting that the spirit is guiding Jesus' calling in such a way that he will be the centre of God's rule and renewal.

But they have to repent. And repent means do a complete backflip. But from what?

First, it meant turning away from the social and political ideologies of hatred and violence that were leading Israel headlong into a ruinous war with Rome.

Second, it meant turning back to a true loyalty to God as it would be displayed in Jesus. Jesus contemporaries trusted all kinds of things; their ancestry, land, Temple, laws, religion, even god if this god did what they expected. Trouble was their God was doing something new. To get in on the act, they had to cut loose from other ties and trust the Messiah Son Jesus as their primary focus.

What do you think of that? Take time to mull over repentance, which is not so much giving up peccadilloes as an about face; a facing up to our deflections and going in another direction.

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR B

Genesis 17.1–7, 15–16; Psalm 22.24–32; Romans 4.13–25; Mark 8.31–38.

In this second week of Lent Abraham and Jesus are central to our journey. Last week God's covenant with Noah started us on our journey. This week God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah continues the journey. Keep in mind the common theme.

Read on.

Genesis 17.1–7, 15–16

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.' Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, 'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.'

Put yourself in the shoes of Abraham or Sarah (or both). Read these promises from God made to you and test your reaction to them. Note down some of those reactions of thought and feeling. What do you make of them?

The back story is that God has called Abraham and Sarah (I'm using their later names); Genesis 12.1–3 tells that story and this family has already started its journey with God from what is today south eastern Turkey down into Egypt and back into southern Canaan and had no little adventure along the way (Sodom and Gomorrah for instance). This God is a very disturbing presence and partner.

But Abraham and Sarah have been promised an heir and heirs require land. They have neither. Still. They have waited patiently. Still nothing.

Now God comes up with a plan. This plan starts with a covenant. We have already seen that God make the same arrangement with Noah (remember the promise and the rainbow?). We often think of a covenant as an agreement that is transactional. You rub my back I rub yours. Except I can't rub God's back. In fact I don't have much I can do a transaction with. I can't think of anything really. Can you?

So when God makes a covenant he makes the promises and he asks us to trust the promises and live life that way. No guarantees, just a promise. No rules, just living life now in the promise of the future. Can you see what a risky business this is? Reflect on the way you live now in the light God's promises. How do you view risk?

Notice that covenant with Abraham has differences with the covenant with Noah. Can you spot them? What are the underlying principles?

What strikes me is "Never again" (Noah) becomes the promise to create a people whose sole rationale is to bring blessing to all the nations. When God first called Abraham and Sarah that was the promise. God calls them to become a nation that is blessed that will then be a blessing to others; "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12.1-3). The cosmic journey in Noah becomes the journey in history with Abraham and Sarah where spiritually and ethically frail,

unbelieving men and women, take a journey with God to bless all the families of the earth. That is plan and the covenant cements it in history. How?

First, God will be God. "I will be their God" (v.7-8). That is critical. It is the purpose of this God to bless all families (including ours) and the called human beings are covenant partners in this. Here is the hidden and often forgotten root, not only of Israel, but also of the church. God is not ashamed to use fickle and flawed people to partner with him in the great adventure. "Never again" now becomes "I will be their God."

Second, Sarah and Abraham become the new Adam and Eve in history. They will be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1.28) just like Adam and Eve and for the same purpose; to be the first fruit of a new creation. Only this time the human capacity to bring ruin upon itself lies in wait. So God's choice is fraught with danger and the risk of failure.

Third, all the necessities will come; an heir, land, governance. The adventure begins.

What do think of God's risk-taking? What has been your story in the adventure? Reflect on the risks God has taken with us and the risks we have taken in this adventure.

Have you worked out what the covenant offers to Abraham and Sarah that can sustain them when everything goes pear-shaped? E.g. no heir, no land or the land taken away, the kingship collapses, the temple burnt to the ground.

Here are some ideas to mull over.

The covenant offers the gift of hope.

The covenant offers the gift of an eternal identity.

The covenant offers the possibility of belonging and community.

The covenant offers a clear and certain vocation.

Can you find those elements? How can these be a spiritual foundation for our adventure?

Psalm 22.24–31: This prayer for help we treasure deeply for its use by Jesus on the cross; “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” The poet goes on to poignantly express forsakenness by God and helplessness in the face of repudiation, violence and death.

We are going to respond to the story of Abraham and Sarah with the second part of the poem because it expresses praise and celebration for the God who rescues the despised. Remember that Jesus prayed this prayer and in it we see something of his soul in worship and praise.

Read on in prayer.

Psalm 22.24–31

For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.

From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay
before those who fear him.

The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the LORD. May your hearts live for ever!

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD;
and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.

For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations.

To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall
bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.

Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord,

and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done
it.

What ways can you see to pray this prayer in response to God’s covenant making with Abraham and Sarah and make it your own?

This prayer of celebration and praise is place firmly in the community. And not any community but a community with special names; brothers and sisters (22), those who fear (revere) him alone, those who seek the Lord, lowly, poor and afflicted. None of this is national or familial, tribal or kin. Instead it centres on “I will be your God.”

The poem celebrates hope. Find all the future tenses in the passage. The future is full of God’s promise. There is hope for the poor, the afflicted, the seeker and the nations. Deliverance and redemption abounds for the world.

There is an assured vocation. Praise and proclamation of God's boundless love for his creation, for the nations is covenant partnering with the God who rules the world and to whom it belongs. We do not partner a usurper. Our lives represent the God who blesses.

This leads into our eternal identity. As Christians we think of that in terms of serving the Living Christ. In Abraham and Sarah's terms it is as covenant partners with the God who blesses the world and acts to restore its health and beauty. They are one and the same story, except we have the privilege of seeing the greater revelation.

The link is found in v.28, "For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations." Jesus says the Kingdom of God is near. God is always on the risky adventure for His creation's sake.

Pray the psalm again as a response to Abraham and Sarah. What does it say to you about your vocation, identity hope and community?

We move on to a passage from St Paul that links our salvation in Christ to the history of Israel, especially that of Abraham and Sarah. We sometimes think that St Paul speaks only about private, individual salvation in his letters; how I get to heaven. And that is true, sometimes. But it is also true that he ties our Gentile salvation in the Messiah with promises made to Abraham. Paul is expounding how God's promises made to Abraham and Sarah were always intended to include Gentiles as well as Jews. Paul sees God's actions and promises in Israel to be one of a kind with the story of Messiah Jesus.

Read on and see what you think are main points Paul is making.

Romans 4.13–25

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations')—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations', according to what was said, 'So numerous shall your descendants be.' He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory

to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith 'was reckoned to him as righteousness.'

Now the words, 'it was reckoned to him', were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Paul is arguing (throughout the whole chapter) that Abraham's faith is the sole badge of membership in God's people. The argument has its complexities so we will stick to the main ideas. To do that look at 13–15 first.

Meditate on the problem that the law poses for the inheritance. Law places us in opposition to God because it shines a light on dark places in Israel (and human life). That is its job. That invokes judgment on ethnic Israel and thus no one can inherit the promises. Thus Torah can't be the badge of membership of Abraham's descendants. Faith precedes Law.

Reflect on the faith of Abraham and Sarah. Examine it carefully and write down what it is like. Pray to exercise that trust in the promising, life-giving God. Trust in God's covenant-keeping justice to bless the whole world becomes the hallmark of Christian faith.

Now, second, let's look at 16–17.

Who is the father of us all? How might reflection on Abraham's faith challenge your own ideas of faith?

According to Paul what was the character of the God Abraham trusted? Reflect on "presence", who gives life to the dead, who "calls into existence the things that do not exist." What do you make of that? How does that contribute to your faith?

Third, read 18–22 in the light of your meditations so far.

Here faith and hope are linked together forever. Trust in the God who promises ridiculous things brings the future into the present. And trust opens the future up, against all odds. Think of the odds here. Stop and assess them. What would you do? The ancients knew as well as you and I do about the effects of time on ageing bodies. And that trust in the God who promises ridiculous things and does them is what constitutes and counts for them as the basis for covenant membership.

If we took this faith seriously what difference would it make to us and our congregation? What is the difference between saying 'I believe God exists' and saying 'I believe like Abraham and Sarah?'

Here is another way of looking at Abraham and Sarah' faith. One day when you have time you can read chapter 1 of Romans where Paul outlines something of the human

condition. If you compare this description with the description of Abraham and Sarah's faith you will find it is a counterpoint to that condition.

Did you notice that Abraham takes God as defining all that he is. Worship thus becomes central. Giving God the glory is the only thing to do.

On the hand as Paul sees the human condition as ignoring God. Thus why worship or give glory? With the result they worship the things they make or own, or others they may exalt such as politicians, stars, kin, and the list is endless and the end is always destructive, demeaning of themselves and others.

Now that is a highly contested view in the modern world. It puts to us a proposition, 'Trust us to bring progress at every level of human life forever and ever. Amen' Or slink off into that weird little cabal that trusts that God alone raises the dead'. What do you think?

The passage finishes with verses 23–25. Paul makes two points. All this applies directly to us. We become covenant partners with the God who brings the future into the present by exercising Abraham and Sarah's faith. No more, no less.

Further, this time the promise is found what Jesus accomplished in his trusting of the God who raises the dead. The massive human evil that disfigures the world and brings it to its knees is itself brought to its knees in the cross. We know that because the crucified is raised and we are covenant people and covenant partners because of it.

We move from the faith of Abraham and Sarah and our part in that to explore the journey to the cross of him "who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification."

Read on.

Mark 8.31–38

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

We are at the pivotal point of the Gospel of Mark. We have arrived swiftly because last week we were at the beginning. Along with momentous declaration of his message this story suddenly and alarmingly focusses our attention. Without warning the proclamation, the healings and exorcisms that have accompanied Jesus' mission to Israel are totally reconfigured. Jesus will be rejected, killed and then rise again.

Whatever was going on in the disciples' heads it was not the same as in Jesus'. So now is the time for clarity. Jesus' plain words are clear to us but we need to pay attention to the title he gives himself, "the Son of Man". This son of man is a figure who appears in Daniel 7. Jesus chooses this well-known biblical figure because he represents Israel, he judges the violent despotic nations, and his rule (kingdom) is indestructible and inexhaustible.

So the nations and their shadowy counterparts in the spiritual creation must get rid of him. They have no alternative if they wish to survive. The rest of the story tells that story. But he must go through with the plan if he is to bring them to heel and heal the world.

How would you feel if you heard this for the first time after a lot of great times on the road? How might you react?

So Peter's reaction is a simple repudiation of the plan. Don't be silly.

Jesus' reaction is alarming. To refuse God's plan for healing the world is to join the politicians and their shadowy counterparts in keeping the world the way it is; broken, oppressed, without healing and at the whim of the powerful and the noisy. In other words, it is Satanic.

Can you identify with Peter? Feel a bit sorry for him? Do we sometimes need the Holy Spirit to rebuke us? To wake us up? Can we become a bit lazy and self-satisfied?

Discipleship has been a bit of a road trip for the disciples up to this point. But now everything changes. The coming of God's kingdom has its opponents, it is always contested. So being God's covenant partner, part of God's covenant people by Abraham and Sarah's faith, has consequences for it plunges us into the contest. It is a contest about what is really important for human life and the created order, and what makes for true power and glory.

Disciples have to prepare themselves for that contest. The way to do that is described here.

Pick out the key points that Jesus says constitutes being a disciple in the contest for the rule of God's justice and peace. Reflect on them and ask what they might mean for you? What is the central feature of discipleship?

The rest of the story in Mark will reveal more fully what this will mean for us. Jesus says here that he thinks that the defeat of the powers and their human acolytes will

take place in his death and resurrection. Jesus is going to restore the world to what God created it to be (not destroy it as some think) and to confront and defeat the powers of death and oppression that contest the world, not by military might which is just another expression of death and oppression, but somehow by his tackling death itself and overcoming it. Nearly as ridiculous as the promises made to Abraham except for one thing, he rose from the dead.

Do you think that the coming of God's rule into our lives means a few minor adjustments to our lifestyle? What do think that coming to Holy Communion, which is centred on our Lord's death and resurrection, requires of us in discipleship.

Abraham and Sarah's journey is now ours. They started it we now walk the way in our own times with their faith and hope to guide us and their frailty and need for forgiveness to encourage us.

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR B

Exodus 20.1–17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1.18–25; John 2.13–22.

Welcome to our studies and reflections for the third Sunday in Lent. Once again we continue our journey through this Lent reflecting on what covenant partnership and fellowship with God requires of us.

Once more we begin our reflections on a piece of scripture that is another challenging story of God's covenant with his people. We have reflected on Noah and then Abraham and Sarah and now we explore the covenant given on Mount Sinai; the covenant of God with the liberated slaves who He wishes to be his covenant partners for the sake of the whole of creation.

Read on. I am sure you will be familiar with what follows.

Exodus 20.1-17

Then God spoke all these words:

²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me. ⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹For six days you shall labour and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

¹²Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. ¹³You shall not murder. ¹⁴You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵You shall not steal. ¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. ¹⁷You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

Reflect on your past experiences with what are known as the Ten Commandments. Sometimes they were displayed on boards in churches in the sanctuary on either side of

the altar. They were taught in confirmation classes. The older communion services had them embedded in the services.

What effect, if any, have they had on your life? What effect if any do you think they might have had on our social or political life together?

The context of the commandments in the book of Exodus had no such a benign or prosaic setting. It is set in an arid land, at the foot of a mountain, among a bunch of escaped slaves who, about three

months before, under the audacious leadership of a man called Moses had confronted Egyptian power and broken its shackles over them in the name of a god who gave his name as YHWH. They had faced raids from other dwellers in the space they traversed, they nearly starved and died of thirst. In all these events the man Moses represents a God who disdains the political and military power of Egypt, who acts as a Liberator, for whom desert raiders are no match and to whom the created world offers obedience and renders up its bounty of food and water. Moses explains that this God is the God of their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But these are vague almost mythical memories after 400 years in Egypt much spent in slavery.

So here at the foot of the mountain is this wild, often ungovernable, mob. They are about to meet their God. They are about to find out what it means to be descendants of Abraham and Sarah. They are not the least bit prepared to become covenant partners with this alarming God.

And Sinai does not make it any easier. Exodus 20 is set in the story of a great epiphany of a God who is far too dangerous to approach and yet who wants to be their God. He is a Liberator and a Protector and a Provider. That's handy. But now he is about to interfere in their politics and their daily life. He is about to create a new society and, as it will prove over time, they are not the least bit happy about that.

What we know as the ten commandments are the core of this brand new development. The total package as we now know it Genesis to Deuteronomy became known as Torah, the teaching or the law.

Thus they are a little different to the domesticated version in the Anglican Church. Mostly they receive a brief nod of recognition and not much else. We don't feel like liberated slaves (because we aren't) but like them we are certainly not happy to invite into our cosy religious life a God who is as dangerous, risk-taking and interfering as this One.

Read and reflect on 20.1–11.

We normally think of law/ethics as a list of rules for moral or legal behaviour. This does not seem like a list of ethical rules even though there are commands in it. What

does verse 2 tell us and why? What is the claim it is making? What questions does that raise for you? In other words why all the God-talk?

I thought about the following: This is all about God the liberator who creates new things among human beings. This is all about how the liberated slaves were to practice God in their common life. This means every sphere of life to be lived around one single loyalty and before God, in YHWH's presence without the distracting compromises of other Gods

God is not a means to an end but the end and cannot be confused with creation. Worshipping idols is never free from the ideology of power over often seen in technological abuse of creation and military might. So God's name cannot be used for such ends, for God cannot be used as a means for my ends. Read 20.8–11 God's holy time.

What do you make of it after centuries of Sabbatarian abuse and legalism?

Have you thought of Sabbath as a work stoppage? After all many citizens live their lives at the behest of someone else's goals. How about some disengagement from the politics and economics that drives that? In the covenant humans are ends, not means to get someone else's bank balance looking healthy. This new society of slaves will not treat each other as instruments but as created under God (hence the reference to creation). Can you see the connection with no idols, One Creator as the sole focus? Maybe there is some profound politics here.

Read 20.12–17 One holy people

The fourth commandment gives the foundation for what follows. Human beings are not to be abused or exploited.

This includes parents for the command is not about obeying parents without question or parents abusing children, but instead, stopping the abuse of older people. Now as then they could be driven out of home, or abused when they could no longer work. They were a drag on the economy. In other words they were useless, no longer working cogs in the political or economic machine. To honour means growing in dignity for both parent and child.

We are discovering the neglect of the elderly in our society. How can we be covenant partners with God in this matter? If you are aging what spiritual and practical issues does this highlight for you?

Human life belongs to God and may not be ultimately violated. We can think up all the casuistry we can to avoid this command but we cannot escape it. I know some of you do not like the reformer John Calvin but here is something he said on this, "that we should not only live at peace with men ... but also should aid, as far as we can, the

miserable who are unjustly oppressed, and should endeavour to resist the wicked, lest they should injure men.”

How can I live faithfully in human relationships? How can I make relationships positively life-giving, nurturing, enhancing and respectful? How can I nurture long term trust?

What makes a society viable? What makes us socially viable? What is the effect of stealing on human personhood and society? But what about a society where inequality is such stealing to live is real?

Why is truth telling so important in communities. Why is deceit so destructive? Why are distortions of reality and collusion with vested interests so damaging?

Instead of covetousness let's use acquisitiveness or more strongly, grasping or rapacious. Does that make a difference to the way you read the last commandment? The word destabilizing occurs to me. Perhaps entitlement too, that is to whatever we may want no matter who else may get hurt along the way.

This is the way in to the new social, political and economic reality for liberated slaves living in the presence of God. They have never been revoked. They remain the non-negotiable will of God not only for Israel but for the world. This is how God wants the world created in human life.

I have found reading and reflecting on the ten commandments quite overwhelming. Take some time to pray for forgiveness and a way forward.

How will this community of liberated slaves sustain themselves on this risky journey with this God who has such a vision of human life?

Read the psalm as a response to vision of Sinai. As you do, note the connections with the first reading.

Psalm 19

¹The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

²Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.

³There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;

⁴yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,
⁵which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,

and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

⁶Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hidden from its heat.

⁷The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul;
the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple;

⁸the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes;

⁹the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring for ever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.

¹⁰More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.

¹¹Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.

¹²But who can detect their errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.

¹³Keep back your servant also from the insolent;
do not let them have dominion over me.

Then I shall be blameless,
and innocent of great transgression.

¹⁴Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to
you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

C.S. Lewis once described Psalm 19 as “the greatest poem in the psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world.” Can you see why?

What struck you about the things this psalm says about God, the world, the Torah and human beings? Take time to reflect on these.

Let’s break the psalm up into three parts (it is a unity) for the sake of our meditation and learning.

Take verses 1–6 and sit with them. What does the poet celebrate? Without speaking what does the created order celebrate? Remember we humans are part of that order although we come up for special attention later. Remember this is powerfully figurative language e.g. they can’t speak but their voice can be heard to the end of the world. Enjoy the language and immerse yourself in it.

A psalm celebrating creation can’t answer the questions of how things came to be but it can point to an answer to another prior question, why anything at all. It also tells us creation is creation and not a god. But it does act as a display of God’s beauty, as a source of inexhaustible knowledge about itself and God. The sun is a metaphor of God’s desire for life giving not life taking and also of shedding light in dark places; nothing escapes God life or light on darkness.

Remember that the Sabbath has its place in the creation narrative and places rest and worship in that context.

How can Sabbath, rest, and the liberating and creating God shape our responses to humankind's present unrelenting waging of war on the created order?

When you have finished read verses 7–10. These describe the nature of God's Torah (perfect) and the effect it can have on human beings (reviving the soul). Read 7–9; note and reflect on them. How does God's revelation of himself and his desire for a world where human beings are not means but ends, where they are not abused or exploited, but instead where humans beings can flourish in joy, wisdom, find enlightenment, find renewal, and live right relations of love and justice confront the church and the world?

Creation for all its wonder and delight cannot give us the personal word from God (revelation) that restores us, enfolds us and enables us even when our pride surprises and overcomes us. It gives us the metaphors we need but not what binds them together in a whole.

Of course, the God's revelation must transform us as individuals. Read 11–14. What is the issue the psalmist faces here (11–13)? What plagues us? Where can we turn?

When we fail as God's covenant partners we turn to God who reveals himself as the "clearer" of sins. Only then living in God's forgiveness and love can I find a life that prospers.

Pray verse 14 as your prayer for the day.

But where to from Sinai and Torah? Doesn't experience teach us that the vision seems to have diminished, even failed over time? Hasn't the tide simply run into the sand? Paul thinks not but you need to read his surprising take on what has happened.

1 Corinthians 1.18–25

¹⁸For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it is written,

'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'

²⁰Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Behind the letters of the New Testament is always a story. Think about letters or emails or texts; they all have a story. And it may be hard for anyone else to read them and make sense of them.

I have spent a lot of my time in research looking at other people's letters and I have to find the story that makes sense of them. Otherwise their power and knowledge is lost. I have just looked at the texts I have exchanged with some of my grandchildren. I seriously doubt anyone else would have much idea what the story was. However, there are clues in the texts to larger stories, theirs, mine, our family and even friends we share in common or political or social matters.

Paul's letters are especially like that and we have only one side of the conversation. So when we come to interpret those letters we need to be a bit humble and try our hardest to pull together Paul's story and his take on Messiah Jesus, and then engage that with the readers' stories, and the swirling religious, political and social life of Paul's day.

It seems that one of the problems in the church at Corinth was its love of power (we can recognize that) and wisdom. Usually we think of a wise person as someone who can discern things about life and help us discern things about life, too. They are great to have around and be around. But what happens when a supposed wise person turns out to be a peddler of wind, perhaps someone who deals in abstractions instead of concrete realities, who loves legal and philosophical minutiae?

Paul knew that he preached a crazy message. Messiahs are not crucified and dead people don't get out their graves. The story did (and does) invite mockery. And if you belong to a socially pretentious sector of the population that is a serious downside.

There is famous caricature drawing and inscription found in Rome on the Palatine that shows a slave (not a wise or powerful person) falling down before a crucified donkey under which are the words "Alexamenos worships (his) god."

Paul has already critiqued their argumentative, fractious disunity which he claims empty the cross of its power and conceals its wisdom (10–17). Then in the passage that we have read he turns the subject on its head and says something like "Let me tell you how stupid God is." "Let me explain the utter folly of God when it comes to power and wisdom. He puts all his bets on a crucified Messiah, and a Jew to boot." Then, as if he has thrown all rationality out the window he argues that this crucified Messiah is the source of wisdom when it comes to knowing anything worth knowing about God and is also the source of the only power worth having, power that restores the whole person from the fractured being that he/she is into the image of God. That power is the source of the renewal of the whole creation. This is God the creator at work again but in the person of a crucified Messiah.

Read the passage again and let its full effect take hold on your imagination. How can we as a church/congregation or individual find alternate sources of wisdom and power for ourselves? What might they look like?

How does this text help us on the journey being covenant partners with God in his desire for a new creation?

Where does the centre of our spiritual life need to be? What might happen if we don't? How can we hold the centre?

Now we move from God's folly to God's glory in the person of Jesus who has just changed water into wine and "revealed his glory" in the wedding at Cana. This story however takes place in Jerusalem, in the Temple and at Passover. Those are all important signposts that we will need to pay heed to.

John 2.13–22

¹³The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.' ¹⁸The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' ¹⁹Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' ²⁰The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' ²¹But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²²After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

I suspect many of us know the story of the cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem quite well. Time and use has smoothed its astonishing, offensive and confronting nature. Matthew, Mark and Luke place the events at the beginning of holy week as we call it. John puts it here to make it clear that Jesus' whole ministry, words and deeds, is confronting to the wisdom and power of the leadership of ancient society. The power was built on economics, religion and politics. From Jesus point of view it reeked. Everything from now on in the gospel story tells the story of how the new 'Temple' was built.

A place to start is to understand the place of the Temple in the imagination of first century Judaism might be Psalm 50.2 "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth." Zion includes the Temple as the place where God dwells with his people. It is a place that generates beauty and light because of the presence of the Glory. It is that kind of poetry that infuses the imagination of the Judaism of Jesus'

day. Psalm 50 imagines the Temple as the unifying, vivifying sacrament of God's presence in glory beauty and light.

Take time to imagine the psalmist's picture.

That is the social imaginary. The sociological and practical reality was different. Wealth, trade, compromising politics with the Romans mingled with worship, music, national celebration and mourning. We know nothing like it.

What Jesus does is focus the attention on the imaginary of the perfection of beauty, God shining forth. From that perspective the Temple politics and commerce reeks.

To understand this, focus on Passover as the celebration of liberation of slaves into freedom and into covenant partnership with God (see above). It is the setting here. The Temple is the home where slaves are set free and find God's beauty in that salvation. What did Jesus' action say to the people and what might it suggest for us on our journey?

Think over how Jesus describes the Temple in verse 16. What does it tell you about Jesus and about the Temple?

Link that with what Jesus says about his death and resurrection 18–22. Can you see what astonishing claims he was making? Can you get the sense of how offensive and confronting they might have been?

This week's readings have stimulated us in so many directions. Choose one train of thought or imagination that you have had and spend time with it in God's presence. What is it about this thought or imagination that stimulates you? What can you do about it?

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR B

Numbers 21.4–9; Psalm 107.1–3, 17–22; Ephesians 2.1–10; John 3.14–21

Welcome to the fourth study of the Sunday readings in Lent. Our readings from the Old Testament for the first three Sundays have set us on a trek with God and Israel setting the foundations that culminate in unexpected ways in the stories of Jesus but confrontingly, the stories that surround cross and its meaning. We have spoken of covenants (Noah, Abraham and Moses/Sinai) and of Israel being covenant partners with God in a new way for the renewal of the world.

This week we trek with Israel and find ourselves immersed in a murkier world of division, conflict and possible insurrection.

The scene has shifted. The theophany of Sinai is just old peoples' reminiscences around the campfire in this story. Forty years of wandering around the southern borderlands of Canaan has dimmed their memories of the Exodus and its rebuttal of the power of empire and the sense of new found liberty in the promise of a homeland. All they remember of that great event is found in Numbers 11.4–6

Numbers 21.4–9

⁴The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! ⁵We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; ⁶but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.'

That's all. So much for God's great saving act. Read on in Numbers 21.

⁴From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. ⁵The people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.' ⁶Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.' ⁹So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

They are taking a trek, a long trek, to avoid tangling with the kingdom of Edom whose ruler has refused them entry. It's hard to blame him. They have inflicted damage on other petty rulers along the way but they also seem like an unstable and dangerous rabble that is willing to threaten to overthrow their own leadership (Moses) from time to time. No one wants a plague like this passing through their land.

The forty years, which we have missed in our reading cycle, have been turbulent. They might have entered the land many years before, but they trusted liars who peddled fear of exaggerated danger instead of trusting truth tellers like Joshua and Caleb. They had advised the people “The Lord is with us; do not fear them” (Nu 14.9). Of course that latter advice seemed rather slim and more risky so they spent 40 years trekking in a desert instead. We are approaching the end of that part of the story.

They want to get around Edom onto the eastern side of the Dead Sea and the Jordan. Edom’s refusal forced them to take a more circuitous route. On the way the issue of fine dining arises again. Complaining along the way has become common and Moses has had to learn to lead them through that.

But can you see why this one is so serious? What do you think it means to mount an insurrection against both God and Moses? Think back to last week’s study. What are the first couple of commandments about? We suggested then that they are at the core of the covenant and what it means to be a covenant partner with God. There is no life threatening crisis here but it does bring on an impatient and bad-tempered tirade. I don’t know how it strikes you but the demand strikes me as a “what do we want? When do we want it?” moment with an implied threat. If we don’t get what we want we will . . . Fill in the dots.

What do you make of God’s reaction? Is this God acting on a whim? God being unfair? Do human beings have responsibility in their interactions with God? What are the responsibilities of covenant partners in God’s renewal of the world? These are all weighty questions so take time to reflect on them.

Have you noticed the paradoxical role of the snakes? What do you think about that? How can something both destroy and heal? What makes the difference? Someone has said that actions by Israel determine whether the snakes are agents of death or life. What actions would they be?

What message does this story convey to the reader concerning God and his people?

Once again, we are invited to pray the psalm in response to the reading from Numbers. Read it through and see how you might do that.

Psalm 107.1–3, 17–22

¹O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures for ever.

²Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, those he redeemed from trouble

³and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

¹⁷Some were sick through their sinful ways,
and because of their iniquities endured affliction;

¹⁸they loathed any kind of food,
and they drew near to the gates of death.

¹⁹Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress;

²⁰he sent out his word and healed them,
and delivered them from destruction.

²¹Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.

²²And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices,
and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

This delightful hymn of praise begins by celebrating God's eternal and unshakeable steadfast love (or covenant love). That love extends to people from all points of the compass from which he has delivered them from their oppressors. He redeems them in steadfast love and gathers them into his joy.

How do you celebrate God's steadfast love? Do we do this well when we meet? How might this become an enlivening part of our life together?

The psalm goes on to tell of the kind of people God redeems from the hands of the oppressor. It tells of a group of wanderers lost in a desert who find a destination that meets their needs (4–9) and of prisoners who are set free (10–16). In verses (17–22) it describes sick persons who are healed and in 23–32 the plight of sailors in a shipwreck are saved.

These are pictures drawn to excite our imaginations at the wonderful redemptive covenant love of the Lord. Our vignette concerns people who through their foolishness bring sickness upon themselves and transgress the law.

Read 17–22 through again and, remembering its context, ask yourself how it speaks to you. This poem is made up of a precise format.

Verses 17–18 describe the distress. What is it? The word 'sick' is normally translated 'foolish person' and usually means a person who acts unwisely, without reference to God, and that foolishness can create dangerous situations (see the book of Proverbs). They were in very dire situation indeed.

In verse 19 the sick cry out to the Lord. Once again the redeeming covenant love of God

Verse 20 tells us how; through the Lord's healing word. At death's door the word of healing draws them back to life and health.

Thanksgiving and the joy of praise are the only response (21–22).

This passage does raise the thorny issue of sickness, guilt, and punishment. We have grown up in modernity with a different model of causation to these ancient people.

But this passage is not talking about causation. The point in this passage is not that God punishes for self-inflicted injury and the consequences that flow from that, but rather that God heals and redeems and gathers those people.

And for that we rejoice. Human healing requires the wonders of modern medicine as a necessary component. That is a product of our role as stewards of God's created order. But we also know that often people require more for their healing; friendship, family, acceptance, love, meaning, joy and peaceful space.

How can we become God's covenant partners in the healing he seeks in his creation?

Perhaps this little excerpt from the letter to the Ephesians can help us answering that last question and progressing our trek. One of the themes of this letter is that of power and especially God's great power seen and experienced in the resurrection of Christ. Symbols of power abounded in Ephesus as the archaeological remains testify. They are breathtaking in their sweep; political, economic, intellectual religious and magical. Paul's prayer in 1.15–23 is that the church as the body and fullness of the risen Christ would live in this resurrection power as a counter to the powers displayed in the public arenas and private homes of Ephesus.

In this passage he reminds the readers (mostly Gentile) of where they started the journey as covenant partners with God and how they came to life. Read on

Ephesians 2.1–10

²You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Read verses 1–3 carefully.

It is Paul's brief and unflattering theological portrayal of humankind that has taken a wrong turn and finds itself heading into the oppression of a foreign despot. It is figurative but confronting reminder to the church in Ephesus and elsewhere about the theological predicament they were in. In other words, it describes where they stood in relation to God's great plan to renew his creation and the human order in it.

They were heading off to a regime that would use its power to deface creation, and bring its human subjects undone and into oppression. Paul uses images like ‘ruler of the power of the air’ to describe the source of the spiritual direction they had taken previously and where it led; the oppression and slavery of death, the final bringing of God’s grand design undone in the unravelling of human life. That is reflected in human life in what Paul calls ‘the desires of flesh and senses.’ We have trivialised this to mean sex. So we can sweep what Paul says under the carpet.

He also describes this path as ‘following the course of this world.’ The ‘ruler of the power of the air’ uses mundane very earthly love of power to bring it all undone. Remember Jesus’ temptations? What do they tell us? Naked power, self’s desires first and only, untrammelled autonomy, and the desire for adulation and celebrity, and using god as a magic trick, the god of the tight corners.

It may feel uncomfortable and alien not only because of the figurative language but also because we have become used to thinking that there is not much wrong with the human race, that it is progressing to a beautiful future with righteous humans governing this utopian future and needs no outside help. Is there a problem with that?

What feels most alien to you in this description? What rings true? Remember the command about idolatry last week? Can that help here? What do you make of Paul’s idea that we really need to grasp this so that we take God’s journey into God’s future?

To that we turn.

What a delight to read 4–7. Savour these words. We move from darkness to light, from oppression to love, from death to life.

What effect do they have on you? What is your response to the claim that God doesn’t leave us mired in oppression but raises us up with Christ Jesus? Some people think that God is stingy, small minded and mean. How does that picture measure up with the picture given here?

What is God rich in? With whom does he share those riches? What does it mean for you that you are raised up with Christ and seated with him? Meditate on the imagery. Remember that this is the promise and vocation of our baptism.

Someone has suggested that the resurrection of Jesus is crucial. Take it away and what you see is all there is, at least as far as anybody knows. What is your response to that?

How do Paul’s words in 4–7 indicate to us the transformations that our ongoing salvation makes to us? Reflect on verses 1–3 again and what they have been released from. What difference has being seated with Christ made? How are we continually being saved? What do you think it means that we reign with Christ now? What difference does that make for you and your vocation in the world?

For the moment all this passes unseen and despised. But some time God's immeasurable richness towards us will be put on full display. Do you look forward to that? And how might it guide you now?

In verses 8–10 Paul picks up something he said in verse 5 “by grace you have been saved” and explains it. Salvation is all the work and gift of God. The dead are feely given life. We have been restored to life. The dead can't raise themselves. We cannot save ourselves.

The dead who are graciously given life now have a vocation. Paul doesn't describe what the works are in this brief summary but we know from elsewhere that they are works that display in our personal lives and our life together what a renewed world might look like. Paul lists as fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5.22–23 love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. This is not an exhaustive list and it is not a checklist either, that I can tick off when I achieve one or the other. They are a way of living salvation and giving hope to the world that death is not the last word.

In v10 we are told that we are what God has made us, God's workmanship just like creation. We are like God's work of art, God's poem, God's picture, sculpture or musical score. Reflect on that. What are you? How does God's rich life find its expression in you?

What happens to us spiritually and morally do you think if we never grasp that everything flows from the richness of God's grace? You might like to meditate on the story in Luke 7.36–50. Take time to compare the story and this short extract from Paul.

Read this story through carefully and quietly keeping in mind the passage from Numbers that we reflected on earlier.

John 3.14–21

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.'

In my years in Kenya I had a friend who delighted in catching butterflies especially in the highland rainforest areas. His pleaded with me to go with him on these expeditions to protect him from the snakes. I had been around a lot longer and knew the rainforest better but . . . None of my African friends would come with me because of the terror of the snake which carried a whole mythical world of disaster and evil along with its propensity to strike. But someone had to pay attention to the snakes because my friend was lost in world of beautiful butterflies.

What a powerful image the snake is and has been in human life and its mythologies. Jesus' image refers back to our first story in Numbers which he translates to his own ministry.

What particular event in his life does he apply to and how does that help your understanding of that event? (A clue is found in the image of 'lifted up'.)

How does Jesus apply the paradoxical nature of the snake to himself? Does that give us insight into what Jesus does when he is 'lifted up?'

What is the means by which the onlooker to the lifting up makes it his or her own? Relate that to the Numbers story.

This is what God's love looks like. John 3.16 is one of the most well-known verses of the New Testament. Its familiarity should not blind us to its simple beauty and powerful, engaging force. Take some time here. Every word counts. See if you can find new things that encourage you or pull you up short.

It is important to remember that eternal life in John's Gospel does not mean 'going to heaven when we die.' Eternal life is John's way of saying that in Jesus God's promise of the age to come, what I have been calling the renewal of the world, is beginning now and it begins in human life when someone trusts the healing work of Jesus on the cross.

The tough part of this saying of Jesus is 17–21. Read them carefully.

What does Jesus (17) say God's purpose is for human beings and the world? Reflect on that. Meditate on it.

Again, what is the means by which a person can lay hold of this love?

In 1.1–4 John has already used the metaphor of light and darkness. The light and all it offers faces rejection. Here darkness covers evil deeds. We have a common saying, 'Shine a light on it' or 'Let the sun shine in'. God lets the sun shine in on human life and it retreats to the dark, because some do not want to let go of the will to power, autonomy from all constraint, violence, the use of the lie to dominate, the use of others as means to our ends, or the economics of inequality. All of these can be broken down into tiny shards in our lives. We shrink into the dark. Such 'darkness' is destroying the

good creation of God and preventing people coming forward into God's new world and living in that.

This gospel reading is packed full of delightful and confronting material. Meditate on it. How does it speak to you?

Take time to reflect on where you have come to in this Lenten journey. Be sure that you take time for quiet. Be still and know that I am God.

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR B

Jeremiah 31.31–34; Psalm 119.9–16; Hebrews 5.5–14; John 12.20–33

As we journey towards Easter the readings become increasingly focussed on the crucifixion and the resurrection and their meanings for Jesus, for the participants and for us. What binds them together is the underlying tune that we have been singing, of covenant and the various riffs that the writers play on this theme. So it continues today and through the week.

The covenant is God's loving, energising and utterly faithful promise to pursue his purpose to solve the problems in creation, using covenant partners who engage this creator and covenant God in loving faithfulness.

I know that is a long sentence, longer than I would normally like. If you can make it shorter please do so read it again and keep it in mind when you are living your life and trying to understand where that story intersects with God's story.

We leave behind us the events of the Exodus and its aftermath and find ourselves in the midst of another crisis that might not only bring the kingdom of Judah to its knees but to the brink of annihilation; the Babylonian invasion of Judah (and surrounding petty states) and the ensuing exile and dispersion (the years 597–587 BCE). It is hard for us to grasp the utterly destructive nature of this event; Temple gone, land gone, royal line of David gone, the people dispossessed and displaced. What future can emerge from this? Has the Lord abandoned us is their cry? (See Psalm 74 and 89) Must we now sink into the anonymity of the nations as slaves or low class workers?

In their better moments they knew that God had been patient with them as they continually rejected the covenant and the offer of covenant partnership over time. But it left a lot of questions hanging as we have seen. That's a long history of contention and argument between the Israelites and the Lord that you find in the Psalms and the prophets.

That leads us to the question behind this prophecy, what of the great plan to restore the world through a restored and renewed nation? And what of the so-called faithful promises, the covenant? Our short excerpt today from Jeremiah is one response to questions like those.

Jeremiah 31.31–34

³¹The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my

people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the LORD’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

It is hard to put ourselves in the shoes of an ancient people with a wildly different cultural and political understanding, but it is worth the try even just for a moment. Perhaps a near experience might be the Rohingya in our world or, much closer to home and more painful, the displacement, murder and dislocation of the indigenous people of this land. Land taken and others transplanted into it, temple razed to the ground (mining companies blowing up sacred sites) and their law ignored and supplanted by that of a foreign ruler. Reflect on the reading now. Maybe our privileged position won’t let us into its inner secrets but let’s see if we can capture a fleeting glimpse. I wonder what they would hear and I wonder what we hear?

I hear the following echoes.

The most obvious is the promise of a new covenant. This chapter begins with God saying “I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people” (31.1). That is the ancient covenant promise that has glued the covenant together. Then in verses 31.3–4 God says “I have loved you with an everlasting love, therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you” and then continues “Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel.”

Who is looking after this relationship? On what grounds? For what end? What does that tell you about this relationship?

Is this just Moses on steroids? More regulation slicing the moral onion finer and finer until absolutely nothing in human life is left out? (That is some people’s view of what Christian religion is including Christians).

The second echo I hear denies this emphatically. Whatever it is, it is not slicing the moral onion more finely. Can you hear God’s grief in verse 32? And how does that match with verses 3–4 that I have quoted above? And what about this extraordinary phrase “...O virgin Israel.” How can the reckless and wayward covenant partner be a virgin?

That reverberates with the third echo I hear. The Lord proposes new way of knowing, being and living (33–34). These words are worth sitting with for some time. What do you hear being proposed? What difference might that make to the way you understand and live the Christian life?

It all begins in the heart, the seat of desire. The desires of the heart are the deepest expression of identity, who we love and who we will embrace. It is there God will meet his restored covenant partners; he will be their God and they will be his desire. Then, in that personal and familial relationship, they will “know the Lord”. A

fundamental egalitarianism emerges where there is no secret knowledge; only the known desire of God for us and our own desire for God.

To enhance that we need to know two stories, our own and the Other's. In this case in knowing the Other's we know our own. God's story intertwines with our story. Knowing and embracing both those stories becomes our identity-giving story.

In the last part of 34 I hear another echo. God breaks the cycle of sin and punishment. How? This is such a common-place we might need to stop and let that sink in. Already the world is being transformed. How transformative is that for you?

Take time to sit with this beautiful promise that even includes us, Gentiles, and not only the Jewish folk of the sixth century BCE and their successors.

Where has God taken you on your Lenten trek?

Once more the psalm responds to the promises found in Jeremiah. Read it as a response and then let that response illuminate Jeremiah.

Psalm 119.9–16

⁹How can young people keep their way pure?
By guarding it according to your word.

¹⁰With my whole heart I seek you;
do not let me stray from your commandments.

¹¹I treasure your word in my heart,
so that I may not sin against you.

¹²Blessed are you, O LORD;
teach me your statutes.

¹³With my lips I declare
all the ordinances of your mouth.

¹⁴I delight in the way of your decrees
as much as in all riches.

¹⁵I will meditate on your precepts,
and fix my eyes on your ways.

¹⁶I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word.

What have you discovered for yourself? Does it indicate some changes you might make? What is a standout for you?

Because of the way the poetry is written it can seem to us that the thought is all over the place and repetitive so we have to work to find the themes. When we do that we can find a fruitful world for meditation on God and ourselves.

This psalm celebrates the relationship between the covenant making God and his covenant partner cast in this poem as a young person or persons. The cement of the

relationship is the revelation God makes of himself and thus of his partner (you and me). His revelation is of his character (love), what he does (saves, redeems, forgives) and what his purposes are for the creation (see above; remind yourself of what the covenant is for and thus our part in it). That revelation has an impact on the partner. So let's see if we can explore this remembering that this is a little window into God's story with us. It's like a tiny moment in a blockbuster movie but without it the movie makes little sense.

So the centre of the poem is the Lord who reveals himself. How else can we know Another if they do not open themselves up to us? Indeed, we to them.

The poet wants discernment or wisdom in living out this relationship of love in daily life.

The seat of the relationship is the human heart. The human heart is the seat of desire, the motivation of life. That is where the interaction with the Lord takes place. Did you notice the connection with Jeremiah? Remember the warning in Noah's back story where God judges the human heart to be wayward? What do think it means that God wants to penetrate to the very citadel of waywardness?

The means that the poet commends is reflection on the Lord's words, promises, covenant requirements and story. All of this comes not in tick box format but in story, like Jeremiah above. They might be stories of betrayal, great grief, forgiveness, and restoration. They range across every human possibility and emotion. The heart finds its identity in this story.

The pitfalls on the way we have already noted; the desire of the human heart. The poet simply speaks of sin and straying; the distraction of the heart's desire to self. Yet it is here that God wants to wrangle with us; in the distracted heart.

So to help with that the psalmist asks the question of keeping the pure way. Notice how this links with Jesus' words, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." (Matthew 5.8). We tend to think of purity as moral rectitude but the psalmist and Jesus have something else in mind. The pure heart is one that has one desire, to love God: All else falls into its place. But we do need wisdom to do that. So we need to treasure God's story with us (remember Jesus' words again, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" {Matthew 6.21}). Seems Jesus is on the same page as the psalmist. The poet uses verbs like, guarding, seeking, treasure, meditating delighting and fixing my eyes on the way, to make sure that we understand that this is a two-way street. God wrangles with us; we wrangle with God as he teaches us. Sounds turbulent.

So what does this say for our spiritual trek? How do you think you can join in? What difference might it make to you?

Hebrews 5.5–14

⁵So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you’; ⁶as he says also in another place, ‘You are a priest for ever, according to the order of Melchizedek.’

⁷In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; ⁹and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, ¹⁰having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

¹¹About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have become dull in understanding. ¹²For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; ¹³for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. ¹⁴But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.

Now let me guess. This reading leaves you puzzled. Where does this fit in the journey? Indeed, where does it fit anywhere? You know what? It is a puzzling selection. But puzzling always pulls us up short and says to us there may be something important embedded here.

We are reading this little excerpt from the letter to the Hebrews in the context of our communal journey towards Easter as well as in our worship. On the other hand, this passage comes at a major turning point in a highly developed argument by a skilful and knowledgeable lecturer. Hebrews is most likely what we would call a public lecture that develops an argument that is artful in presentation and skilful in the use of knowledge. We need to recognize these differing contexts if we are to make sense of what is said and find nourishment for our journey. Puzzling sometimes needs unravelling.

This lecture called Hebrews has one purpose; to help Christian folk avoid one of the pitfalls of the wayward human heart, slowly sliding away from Christ into something more comfortable and relaxed. The author does that by examining who Jesus Christ is and what he has done for them and the world. And because his audience may well be Jewish Christians he uses the ancient scriptures as the grounds for his argument and exposition. This was a serious pastoral issue then and today. Cherry-picking religious ideas sounds like a great idea; mix and match (or maybe not) religion. It is the modern (or postmodern) way.

The passage breaks into two parts. The first part is found in 5–10. The second part 11–14. Did you notice that there does not seem to be much connection between them? The reason lies not in Hebrews but in the lectionary choice. Verses 5.5–10 are the

conclusion of an argument that finds its core texts in Psalm 2 “You are my Son” and Psalm 110.4 “You are a priest forever.” These are the roots of the argument that has been before and the foundations for what is to follow. In the first chapters of Hebrews the author like a good advocate lays the groundwork for his case. In chapters 7 and onwards he expands that case into full blown exposition of what that all means and why they should not let their faith slide into an oblivion of muddy thought.

On the other hand, 5.11–14 begins an appeal for folk to pay attention. He promises to take them on a journey that will require hard intellectual and spiritual effort but will lead, not into a pit of despair, but to a mature discerning faith rooted in a clear grasp of who Jesus is and what he has done.

Remember that in its original context this is spoken communication, the speaker has brought his preliminaries to a close and now wants the audience to pay attention to the tough stuff.

So even in this fractured form in the lectionary the author invites us on the one hand to reflect on Christ in order to give us a footing and to face the fact that the wayward human heart is often happy to drift along in a muddle without maturing.

What can you learn about Jesus’ person and work? Why is that important in our covenant journey towards Easter? Meditate on Jesus work as described here. (The reference to Melchizedek concentrates on the word ‘forever’, impossibility for routine priesthood in the Temple). Can you see the force of the conclusion in 8–9 as an argument against apostasy? How does that help us on our pilgrimage?

Up to this point the lecturer has suggested that his listeners had acquired a ‘hearing impairment.’ Having such an impairment I know what it is like to switch off and pay no attention (off with fairies). Now the author is pressing his assessment home to them. What would it have been like to hear that? How might you have reacted to the speaker?

He does call them dull in understanding and uses the metaphors of learning the ABC all over again (the basic elements) to describe them. Worse, he goes on to use the contrast between children feeding on milk and adults being nourished by solid food. This type of technique was used in the ancient world to keep the audience on their toes and engaging with the speaker.

How do you engage this imagery? Does it wake us up to particular perils on the spiritual way? Are there ways we can master the faith and learn discernment that will help us live our lives well?

The speaker is forcing us as members of a Christian community to address the issue of Christian growth. There are no answers given in this tiny fragment but we cannot escape the challenge.

Slowly we are wending our way towards our goal but there is a deep question yet to answer. The lecturer broached it in Hebrews, “Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.” Now the great hurdle comes into focus and will remain in the foreground; “When I am lifted up from the earth...”

To that we turn.

John 12.20–33

²⁰Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.

²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’ ²²Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

²³Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

²⁷‘Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—“Father, save me from this hour”? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’ ²⁹The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’ ³⁰Jesus answered, ‘This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

The journeys of Jesus have come to an end. This is the last public speech he will utter; hope, promise and anguish fill the air all at once and for the moment it is hard to know how they fit together.

The episode is full of people all trying to grasp the significance of the moment. Jesus is the key and he alone grasps it. But there are Greeks, Philip and Andrew, God and the crowd. And the poor Greeks don’t seem to get an answer.

Read the passage again and see if it’s possible to enter into the conflicting expectations that come to a head in this scene. What do you hear? What do you see?

In 12.19 the Pharisees say, “Look the world has gone after him.” Then the Greeks come and say “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” The ‘prophecy’ is true. What will happen now? Why are the Greeks significant? These are Greeks who have been attracted to Judaism but now want to see something else. Their search triggers the events that follow.

But what will those events be and what is their meaning?

Jesus’ glory will be on full display. Glory usually means splendour and power, brilliance and in our world celebrity.

Then we get the eloquent image of the grain falling into the ground, dying and bringing forth new life. The glory of the growth demands the dying in the ground; one life to create boundless life.

And just to be sure we understand the full import of this image disciples have to learn that this is their pattern of and path to glory (25–26). If the disciples (or Greeks who wish to see Jesus for that matter) were looking for celebrity and power then what is about to unfold will destroy the illusion.

Reflect on this pattern of discipleship. Are we as covenant partners willing to take the risk?

Jesus turns back to his own situation and faces the terror he feels as the hour is now with him (27– 33). The hour has come and so has anguish. He turns to the Father to bring him safely through. Only in that way can God be glorified; that way alone can God's power and love be seen in full brightness. There is no pugnacious masculinity here so beloved of our world and its politics. I am reading a book called *Jesus And John Wayne* which is an historical and theological exploration of a kind of Christianity in which Jesus and John Wayne (a gun-toting masculinity that saves the world) are conflated.

What pattern of human life does Jesus portray for us in this short inner conversation? What sort of humanity does a covenant partner to this God look like?

The Father's answer envelopes Jesus' prayer. True glory and true power lie elsewhere. The way the world will be restored is the defeat of the ruler of this world and his minions. And it comes through being lifted up. We have come across this before in the story of the healing snake.

This is the route that God chooses to restore his rule in the world where those who rule it have laid it waste, trampled the poor and exalted themselves as kings, lords and even gods. It is the route of weak flesh, grief and allowing those who represent the ruler of this world to exercise their deadly and pugnacious masculinity with its untrammelled lust for power. He will die, lifted up.

Blinded by their lust they don't see the deadly consequences. They and their master are exposed for the world to see. The world will look and the cross will draw them to a new way.

Someone has said "Swords don't glorify the creator-God. Love does. Self-giving love best of all." Reflect on our mission as the covenant God's people, covenant partners. We might not use swords but how can we do better?

SIXTH SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR B—PASSION SUNDAY OR PALM SUNDAY

Isaiah 50.4–9a; Psalm 31.9–16; Philippians 2.5–11; Mark 14.53–64.

Welcome to the Sixth Sunday in Lent and to the beginning of God’s new future. Surely not you may think; it’s the end of the road, the trek, the journey. We have been winding our way to the cross where death, grief and mourning abound. That sounds like a very emphatic end in which the future looks bleak indeed.

Read through this passage quietly and carefully. Pay attention to phrases, ideas or images that you may have come across before in your Bible reading. Make a note of them and see if you can remember what the connection might be.

Isaiah 50.4–9a

⁴The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.

Morning by morning he wakens—wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught. ⁵The Lord GOD has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backwards.

⁶I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

⁷The Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
he who vindicates me is near.

Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together.

Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me.

⁹It is the Lord GOD who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?

All of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.

Who is the speaker in this prophecy? It looks like the prophet at first sight but the lectionary choice has left out verse 10 which you can look up and find that it is someone called the servant. That helps us understand better this passage of humiliation and vindication.

This part of Isaiah comes to birth during the Babylonian exile (587–539 BCE). The prophet addresses the devastating loss, humiliation, dislocation and sense of the loss of God with its loss of identity, meaning and purpose. One way he does this is through speaking of a figure, a prophetic servant who would help restore Israel and renew it from within and out of its trauma. Up to this point he has spoken of this servant twice in 42 and 49. He will speak once more, after this passage, of the servant in Isaiah

52.13–53.12. This last is the best known to most Christian people through reading the Gospels (it is often read on Good Friday), but also through music, especially Handel. The mission of the servant is to restore and renew Israel to be God’s covenant people once again. The servant poems explain how he will do that. Each one gives a different part of the picture.

Jesus and early Christians used these poems to help them interpret who Jesus was and what he was doing, and what his mission was in God’s plan to address the problems of creation. The church sees itself as heir to the servant legacy in pursuing God’s plan.

How does this person see his ministry? How does the servant prepare for that ministry? How does the servant pursue that ministry? What effect does the ministry have? What are the opponents trying to do? Where does the servant turn for help?

When I reflect on this passage I get the picture of a teacher, what the Hebrew calls “a well-instructed tongue.” Not just a mind filled with information but a well-instructed tongue. That is a tongue that can turn information into knowledge that sustains the weary. This is not knowledge that privileges the elites of power and wealth but penetrates the terrible fogs of humiliation, loss, grief and collapsed meaning. It is not merely an antiseptic acquaintance with ideas but a word of salvation and not judgment, forged in the crucible of struggle in a collapsed life.

The only way to get this is to listen constantly to the God who reveals; each morning in the full light of rationality and personal intimacy. Then the servant must obey the word.

The trouble is folks have no intention of hearing it let alone obeying it. The prophet is humiliated publicly as is the message that exposes their desperate need and their hope. The message is the very expression of God himself. Humiliating the prophet expresses deep disdain for the character of the God who seeks them out in their distress.

The prophet may be shamed but he is not ashamed. God vindicates against every slight. His opponents will finally wear out, insubstantial as a moth-eaten garment. He has taught what he has heard; listened and obeyed the word of God. He is innocent.

Once again read the Psalm as a response in worship to the reading from Isaiah.

Psalm 31.9–18

⁹Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress;
my eye wastes away from grief,
my soul and body also.

¹⁰For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing;
my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away.

¹¹I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbours,
an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee
from me.

¹²I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken
vessel.

¹³For I hear the whispering of many—terror all around!—
as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life.

¹⁴But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, ‘You are my God.’

¹⁵My times are in your hand;
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.

¹⁶Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.

¹⁷Do not let me be put to shame, O LORD, for I call on you;
let the wicked be put to shame; let them go dumbfounded to Sheol.

¹⁸Let the lying lips be stilled
that speak insolently against the righteous with pride and contempt.

Can you picture in your mind what experiences the psalmist is describing?

How are the experiences of the psalmist and the prophet similar?

How does this prayer respond to the experience of the servant? Is there something that
stands out for you as you pray this prayer? Nurture the thought. What does the psalm
teach you about trust?

Can anyone be that threatened or persecuted? Is the psalmist paranoid? Can we, who
have managed to secure our lives around wealth and power, ever appreciate what
Psalm 31 is about? Or for that matter the servant in Isaiah? Or for that matter, Jesus?

The faithful psalmist (and the servant) knew in her or his life the kind of opposition
that resulted in the cross. The psalmist had learned the happiness that results from
surrendering one’s life to God because it means truly claiming one’s own life. The
psalmist is teaching us to live in trust and faithfulness as a covenant partner with God.
“I trust in you, O Lord; I say, “You are my God.” My times are in your hand; deliver
me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.” (14–15).

The two fundamental characteristics of God that Psalm 31 emphasises are faithfulness
and steadfast love. These two empower and energise the people of God, the church, to
live out faithfulness and steadfast love. These are the two fundamental characteristics
of the Christian life. In our world, full

of isolated selves and “terror all around” (13), a church that witnesses in its life to
such a God will fall foul of those whose identity, wealth and power resides in the
illusionary idols of our culture.

Wherein does your identity lie?

We live in a world of celebrity wannabe heroes. Often they are white, male macho braggarts. They play football, run governments across the world of every conceivable kind, and front media, business and religious organisations. They often have immense organisational skills that become a foundation for their power based in money, military might, thuggery or adoring worshippers or some combination of all of them.

The ancient world was no different and Paul knew of them from Alexander the Great to the great emperor Augustus. Some were better at it than others but at its heart was one desire expressed in one word; power or power over. Power brought glory and its trappings. It gave the capacity to bring others to heel and to obey the leader; the name does not matter, principal, director, CEO, bishop, priest, political leader, husband, and boyfriend.

This subject, power, has been the underlying current in all our Lenten studies this year. Of all the Gospels Mark's is the one that most forthrightly deals with this question within the ancient world and between the disciples.

The subject has not been absent in Paul's writings either. In this excerpt the apostle has a conflictual situation in Philippi in mind. He is well aware that every situation of conflict is an opportunity for some to exert their power to coerce others to concur with their judgment. He is well aware that self-interest, selfish ambition, or conceit can drive Christian folk. That is what he speaks of in Philippians 2.1–4.

Read on and note what he has to say on the matter.

Philippians 2.5–11

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Given the ancient world's view of heroic leadership and ours how counter-cultural is this little poem or hymn that Paul lays out here? What do you think he is asking the little church in Philippi to do together remembering that this passage is addressed to the whole congregation as something they might do together?

What was the mind of Christ that Paul refers to? What does God do about it? What do you think that means? What does it disclose about God? Does that challenge your understanding?

When I read this passage I am reminded of an encounter Jesus has with some ambitious and power-hungry disciples. It occurs in Mark 10:35–45. Two of the disciples have asked Jesus that he grant them the right to sit at Jesus' right hand when he came in glory. It was a serious play for ultimate power not just a couple of naughty boys being cheeky.

Jesus' response is telling:

“You know that among the gentiles those whom they recognise as their rulers lord it over them and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

With this in mind, and thinking of the Old Testament stories, who was it who arrogantly grasped at the chance to be like God? Adam is the culprit and his grasp at power was exploitative and self-serving; this self-interested search and grasping has become the pattern of the human use of power among us ever since.

Israel, the covenant partners of God, suffered from it and their leaders in Jesus' day sought it from the Romans or against the Romans. Whatever, Israel crippled herself as God's covenant partner. And the church has gone on and on not heeding the huge lessons in the little word translated “exploited.” It continues the tradition when it smooches up to big politicians, big economics, big celebratory and longs for power to exploit.

Jesus on the other hand is the countercultural antihero. He has all and he refuses to grasp anything. He shares God's form (a difficult idea, as God has no form in our normal use of the word) and in Colossians 1:15 describes Christ as in the image of God (another difficult idea as God has no image). But it is the best language can do to describe the fact that Messiah Jesus was not a creation in a pantheon but shared all the glory of God.

In verse 7 we see the decision take to go all the way to the cross and the only way to do that was to take on being human so that he could become truly obedient to the covenant, become the true covenant partner to sort out the problems in creation and restore it. Being human meant taking on particularity; that is, all the limitations of time in history, geography, culture and social mores, language, bodily vulnerability, growing up, joy, pain and suffering, conflict with overweening power and all the consequences of that. That is just a glimpse into what verse 7 might mean.

The difficult little phrase “he emptied himself” has been taken to mean that Jesus gave up being God. I trust a moment's reflection will help you see that God cannot ever not be God. It makes no sense. So we are stuck with the limitations of language again. Messiah Jesus gives up voluntarily the privileges of eternity to enter into particularity

and in doing so tells us what it truly means to be divine (and human too). This is what Godhead is. No grasping at power and privilege, just the one desire to see the ills of the world healed and restored to its one great purpose; human beings living in peace, joy, love, justice and mercy in fellowship with One who loves them.

This is what it means to be equal with God. The Cross is the true meaning of who God is. Is that your God?

The word “therefore” in verse 9 is the fulcrum of the poem. Why is Jesus honoured in the way described in 9–11? Because in the incarnation and the cross Jesus has done what only God can do. This is the very heart of the vision of God; the depths of Jewish monotheism, of creator and covenant maker, now made plain for all to see.

The honour God bestows is the name of God the Lord and to that name every knee shall bend. The words come from Isaiah 45.23 a fiercely monotheistic passage; “To me and me alone, says the LORD, every knee shall bend and every tongue shall swear.”

To people in Paul’s day besotted by power and celebratory and now in our own people were and are shocked beyond belief that the one true God might be known in in the person of a crucified Jew. That does not fit with our views of how power works. This God is best known when he abandons his rights for the sake of us all.

Dare we live together like that and share a gospel that says that? What do you make of the mind of Christ now? Is it ever possible to share together the mind of Christ?

The Gospel reading today is Mark 14.1–15.27. The Passion story could be read in one sitting and just letting the whole story with its conflicting emotions, its terror, ruthlessness, self-interest and deliberate humiliation draw attention to the powerless vulnerability many people feel and experience in their lives. Remember Paul’s poem that this is the LORD, the creator and covenant maker seeking the welfare of his covenant partners for the sake of the creation.

I have chosen two passages that pick up some of the themes we have studied and prayed over during Lent.

The first are the well-known words of the Eucharist. The link is the word covenant which links the great theme we have explored and the cross. The disciples and Jesus celebrate a meal at Passover time under extreme vulnerability and stress. Fear and confusion is in the air.

Celebrating Passover was not just the festival of remembrance of liberation from the great empire Egypt and kicking a bit of sand in their eyes as well (it all happened long ago and what a great tale), it reminded them that despite their circumstances under an oppressive empire (Rome) they were a free people and this was a subversive political act. It encouraged faith and hope and sustained loyalty (and still does).

Mark 14.22–25

²²While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, ‘Take; this is my body.’ ²³Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. ²⁴He said to them, ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. ²⁵Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.’

In this reimagining of Passover Jesus places himself and his death at the very centre of the liberating story. It is again a subversive act, a political act. Somehow (he has tried to help the disciples understand) at this moment of crisis and death who truly rules the world will be made clear and liberation will be secured. The liberating covenant is secured and the covenant partners join together in a meal of solidarity. Soon they will become liberating actors in this story but the meal remains central to their core. Here they meet the Jesus who binds them together, here he does his freedom-work in their lives, and here he takes them on a liberating journey into their world wherever they might be.

And they know that there is only one Liberator and he is at the head of the meal; One who is crucified. The meal is the ultimate reversal of power and politics as they are known; it is the sign of God’s covenant to restore the world to its beauty and freedom.

Do you commit yourself to your subversive task every Sunday? I remember a very old African pastor who I visited after he had been beaten badly by whips and machetes by military and police telling me what the Eucharist meant. “Every Sunday I pledge myself the Lord who loved and set me free. They can do nothing.” Is that your Eucharistic faith?

Our next text is a contest between the liberation of the cross and the power of political and religious might.

Mark 14.53–65

⁵³They took Jesus to the high priest; and all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes were assembled. ⁵⁴Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the guards, warming himself at the fire. ⁵⁵Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none. ⁵⁶For many gave false testimony against him, and their testimony did not agree. ⁵⁷Some stood up and gave false testimony against him, saying, ⁵⁸‘We heard him say, “I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.”’ ⁵⁹But even on this point their testimony did not agree. ⁶⁰Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, ‘Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?’ ⁶¹But he was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, ‘Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?’ ⁶²Jesus said,

‘I am; and “you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power”, and “coming with the clouds of heaven.” ’ ⁶³Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, ‘Why do we still need witnesses? ⁶⁴You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?’ All of them condemned him as deserving death. ⁶⁵Some began to spit on him, to blindfold him, and to strike him, saying to him, ‘Prophecy!’ The guards also took him over and beat him.

Take some time to enter into this segment of the story. It is powerful drama, sparingly told. Peter is introduced but sits on the sidelines and is silent. His turn will come and he will betray it all. But for the moment he is an onlooker. You could take the onlooker’s view here and sit with Peter and feel the fear and oppression that the exercise of power has.

Jesus is being tried as a false prophet and thus leading Israel astray. Thus the blindfold and taunts at the end. Questions about the temple and messiahship all lead in the same direction. Jesus is leading Israel away from God and God’s law. That is the charge repeated in later Jewish sources.

More immediate was Jesus attitude to the Temple. We know that Jesus spoke about his authority and acted with authority in the Temple. We know that he warned that the Temple would come to an end. The Temple was central to the life of Israel, both political and religious. It was the sign and seal of God’s presence, his favour and promise of freedom from bondage.

Jesus remains silent about the confused charges relating to the Temple. So when Jesus remains silent about the Temple there is one key question left. Are you the Messiah? Now the charge of being the messiah was not a capital offence under Jewish law. At one level in this set of circumstances it was probably laughable. But Caiaphas knew it wasn’t and pressed on with “the Son of the Blessed One.”

We the readers of St Mark have heard this before in Jesus’ baptism and in the transfiguration. It was God’s testimony to Jesus’ and we know from the beginning of the Gospel that was the testimony of Mark. It is a royal title; God’s king acting on God’s behalf to carry out God’s mission in Israel; to restore Israel as God’s covenant partners in God’s covenant mission. Now Jesus will give his own testimony and it is dynamite.

This is a highly charged political moment and Jesus takes it with both hands and incriminates himself. This has been the basis of his ministry. He is bringing together two explosive texts, Psalm 110 and Daniel 7.13.

Not only is Jesus acknowledging that he is a rebel king but that they will see him vindicated as both Messiah and Son. Not only that but in that vindication he will share the throne of Israel’s God. That is where real Power resides. He is a true prophet; he will replace the Temple in himself.

Jesus stands before the official ruler of Israel and declares that God will put him in the right and the court in the wrong. The cat is out of the bag.

What follows is inevitable. The white noise of the abuse that follows, as nasty and vicious as it is, is the soundtrack to human power and its corruption. Now they can get the real power involved; Rome. This is where the justice of political violence and intimidation can now be fully unleashed. To the Jewish folk the spin doctors would present him as a blasphemer against the precious name and law of the LORD. To Rome he would become a rebel king, a pretender, and Rome had one simple answer to that; death by crucifixion.

So the covenant God submits himself to those who do not want to see the liberating power of the covenant find a foothold in their world of power politics. And one covenant partner sits quietly in a corner hiding, watching weighing up his options.

The trek is nearing its end. Where has it led you? Has anything changed? See if you can bring the themes of the readings of this week together. What have you learnt? What is God's future for you? For us?

Take some time to pray and prepare yourself for the great days of the Easter period.