

NOTES ON THE READINGS

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

YEAR B 2021 1

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.

Genesis 9.8-17

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.

8 Then 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)

Psalm 25.1-10

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.

Of David.

¹ To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

² O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.

³ Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁰ All 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.

1 Peter 3.18-22

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.

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.

Mark 1.9-15

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

9 In 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.'

12 And 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.

14 Now 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.

Bring together from your notes what you have reflected on and learnt. Where to next?

Colin Dundon

Lent 2021