

‘A World in waiting’ – A homily for the first Sunday in Lent

Genesis 9.8-17

1 Peter 3.18-end

Mark 1.9-15

On the front cover of the newest edition of *The Week* the Tory party is imagined as a rather vocal and fractious family bundled into a car on a long journey with the hapless Boris as the dad in the front seat. ‘Are we there yet?’ whinge those in the back seat as a despairing Matt Hancock tries to read the map. Boris does indeed face an acute dilemma this week as he makes an announcement about the easing of lockdown. On the one hand vaccines are beginning to take effect, but on the other is the danger of relaxing too soon and then having to re-apply the breaks. People and the economy are showing signs of extreme fatigue, and as I said last week, the monotony of life is beginning to get to us all.

In each of our readings today, both Old and New Testaments (you can find the New Testament reading in *PewNews* today) and our Gospel, we find a world in waiting. In the first, the whole of creation has finally emerged from the maelstrom of the flood. As the chaotic waters begin to subside, the question remains: what will this new creation look like, will its relationship with its Creator still be one of antagonism and wrath, or has the catastrophe enabled a new kind of relationship to emerge? In our second reading, the whole world waits as Christ is put to death in the body, but mysteriously made alive in the spirit, visiting those who have strangely been waiting in captivity since Noah’s day, those lost in darkness and death, languishing until some new light at last shines. And in our Gospel, as Jesus breaks through the surface of the waters and is driven by the Spirit deep into the wilderness, the world waits to see what difference this will all make. Can this Jesus triumph in his confrontation with the powers of sin and death where others have only failed?

In the story of the Flood in Genesis the agonistic hubris of humanity, hell bent on destroying itself and its world, gets too much for a mournful and impatient God who decides to start again. This cannot be 'the best of all possible worlds,' riven as it is with violence and pride, choked almost to death by human consumption and greed, caught up in swirling currents of rivalry, suspicion, hatred and fear. So God undoes the act of creation itself, allowing it to be consumed by the chaotic waters out of which it was spoken into being in the first place. How often we think, if only we could start again? If only I was somewhere or someone else, not stuck with this set of desires, hopes and fears, not caught up with these people or stuck in these circumstances. Wouldn't it be easier simply to give up and start again?

But God soon realises, pretty much like each of us must, that we are what our history makes us, and we cannot escape back into some original lost paradise. Reconciliation and renewal can only be ahead of us. We must learn, just like God in this mythical story, that the resistant lump of humanity takes time and patience to become something worthy, something wonderful. We must learn what it means to walk with grace and gentleness in our fragile and beautiful world, a world forever marred by violence and greed, a world crying out to be healed. The deepest reality of this ancient Hebrew story is not to be found in the wrath and judgement of the Flood itself, but rather in the scene that we encounter today. Here, God and the human family meet again on the other side of catastrophe, both with broken and yearning hearts. And the yearning that they feel is not one of retribution or wrath, but for reconciliation, healing and restoration. 'Never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth,' says God, as life slowly begins to bloom once more. 'Never again,' says God.

Turning to our New Testament reading we find some spirits in prison. These are those who feel they have been lost for a millennia. These are those broken by their own histories of hurt and failure; these are those paralysed by the stories others have told of them, or lost in a sense of personal judgement and self-hatred; these are those who are

unable to hope anymore, engulfed in personal tragedy, trapped in bonds of their own and other's making; or else they are those in real physical prisons, prisoners of war, or those held as hostages against their will, those punished for deliberate or desperate crimes, those falsely accused and condemned for something they never did. This seems a hopeless waiting indeed, but the crucified Jesus, 'put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit,' can even reach into dark places such as this. Christ, in breaking through the systems of human retribution and violence, in flooding the place of death itself with the light of love, breaks into the very prisons of our memories and sets us free. As Rowan Williams tells us, his 'is a life which can weave itself into the fabric of lives remote in time and space from its original context – not simply as a narrative memory, but as an active and transforming presence, never exhausted or assimilated.'

This transforming presence, neither exhausted or assimilated, is seen most clearly, perhaps, in our Gospel today. As he is baptised, Christ comes out of the waters, just like the new creation after the Flood. The heavens are torn open, the Spirit descends, and the voice of the Father is heard. Jesus' life, in all its entirety, his words and actions, his death and resurrection, floods the whole of creation with purpose and meaning, bringing the whole of humanity to life with dignity and joy. As he is driven into the wilderness, he confronts the wild beasts and is fed by angels. Even as creation itself yearns for complete freedom and reconciliation, even as humanity lurks in the darkness of its various prisons, even as we cry 'how long,' in the middle of isolation, fear and distress, even in these wilderness places, this Jesus answers the call, journeying into the wilderness with us, and in his presence the desert slowly blossoms and bursts into song.