Homily – 1st Sunday of Lent (B): 18.2.18

*Gen. 9: 8-15; 1 Pet. 3: 18-22 & Mk. 1: 12-15*

We meet together on this first Sunday of Lent, the first “station”, the first stopping point for reflection on this annual Lenten journey which we began last Wednesday. When St Benedict wrote his Rule around 540 AD, the season of Lent was a well established part of the liturgical cycle (even if it had not quite assumed its final form), and so he dedicates a whole chapter to how Lent should be observed. One or two of his comments are quite interesting. He begins the chapter by saying *“the life of a monk should be a continuous Lent”* (RSB 49:1) – before admitting that few of his contemporaries had the strength to make this a reality. I suspect what he meant when he said that is that monastic life, indeed Christian life, should always have some element of striving, should always have some element of “stripping away” the unnecessary, should always be marked by prayer and fasting and almsgiving. Indeed, if you look at many of the prayers we use at Mass in this season – many of them going back to the 5th and 6th centuries – the vocabulary is marked by just these themes: striving against temptation, spiritual combat, discipline and so on. Benedict himself echoes these themes in his usual balanced way – encouraging his monks to *“wash away the negligences of other times”* (49:3), resisting old evil habits like gossiping, over-eating, and over-sleeping and doing more of the good – prayer, reading, self-denial.

Yet Benedict also encourages the monks to make this time a period of *“joy and spiritual longing”* (49:7). Perhaps that sounds strange. Certainly conversations with the students over the past few days have all been about what they are “giving up for Lent” – and that’s an approach I remember only too well from my own school and student days, before joining the monastery. It was all about “giving things up” – whether chocolate or sweets or pudding, or, once a little older, alcohol or cigarettes or whatever. There was much about sacrifice, about sharing the sufferings of Christ in the desert – very little about joy and spiritual longing. And yet in the early Church, Lent did have that characteristic of longing. For those to be baptised at Easter, for whom Lent was the final period of preparation, there was the longing for the remission of their sins in the waters of the font. Equally, for the Penitents, those guilty of serious sins and locked away on Ash Wednesday, there was hope and longing, since they would be publicly reconciled to the Church on the morning of Maundy Thursday. For the whole Church, then, it was a time of renewal, of growth, of new birth and hope.

Where can we find our own spiritual joy and longing this Lent? Well, perhaps we see some clues in today’s readings. In our first reading, we see the end of the Flood narrative from Genesis. The story is a familiar one. Frustrated that sin has been increasing amongst men since Adam’s day, God decides to wash everything away and start again. But this is not just a narrative of destruction, a narrative of punishment for sin, a narrative of divine wrath. It is a salvation story, a story of hope. God sees Noah and his family, that they at least are blameless. Equally, he knows there is no fault in Creation – it was marred by human sin. And so he orders the building of the Ark, the salvation of Noah and his family, the salvation of the wild beasts and birds of every type. And after the Flood has receded, God makes his first covenant with mankind – a covenant whose witness is the rainbow. And as St Peter notes, this salvation story is not just history – it involves us too, since the waters of the Flood are a type of the waters of the font, the ship of the Ark a type of the vessel of the Church. God saved Noah “by water” – and he saves us too in the same way. And that is something in which we can rejoice.

Then we see Jesus in this morning’s short Gospel. It is traditional on this first Sunday of Lent to focus on Jesus’ hunger and thirst in the wilderness, and on his three temptations by the Devil – indeed today’s Preface focuses on precisely those themes. Yet Mark deals very briefly with those things – all in just one sentence. For Mark, it seems to be the timings that matter. He tells us that Jesus was in the wilderness “for forty days and forty nights”. Just so, the author of Genesis tells us that the flood was over the face of the earth forty days and forty nights, purging it of evil. Moses was on Mount Sinai in the presence of God for forty days and forty nights when he received the 10 commandments. Elijah – in the depths of despair – travelled forty days and forty nights through the wilderness to reach the same mountain, and there encountered the Lord in the “still small voice”. So now Jesus himself spends forty days and forty nights in the wilderness – alone with his Father, tested by the Devil. So too for us, these forty days and forty nights in the wilderness of Lent are a real opportunity for us to encounter God, to hear ourselves that “still small voice”, even if we too are tested by temptation along the way.

And it is in the strength of this wilderness encounter that Jesus, again like Moses and Elijah before him, takes up his public ministry. And Jesus’ words – the very first words he speaks in Mark’s Gospel – are not words of condemnation, but words of opportunity: *The time has come. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the Good News*. Even that word *Repent!* which we immediately associate with sin, has a somewhat different sense in the Greek – *Metanoiete* is an “open word”, meaning think again, let your mind be changed, be transformed. Jesus is inviting his hearers to faith, to let their minds and hearts be transformed by the message they hear, the message of the closeness and mercy and power of God for salvation. And he invites us to become open again to that Good News in these consecrated days of Lent, he invites us too to hear the good News of salvation, invites us to let God’s message transform us utterly.

And perhaps just one last little thought. That first saving covenant of God with Man was sealed by a sign in the heavens – the rainbow against the storm clouds. The ultimate covenant which Jesus brings is also sealed in the same way – with the stark outline of the Cross on Calvary, set against the dark and clouded sky of Good Friday. Both are signs of God’s power over sin, both are signs of God’s eagerness for *our* salvation. How could we not find joy and longing in that?

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