

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year B

First Sunday of Lent

First reading:

(Genesis 9.8-15)

The Covenant with Noah

Lent is a time when the first reading really comes into its own. On the Sundays of Lent the Church leads us step by step through the preparation of the People of God for the supreme event of Easter, the Resurrection of Christ. In each year of the three-year cycle of readings, the first Sunday starts with the Bible story before Abraham. This year it is the promise to Noah that God will never again let a destructive flood devastate the earth. The first thing Noah does on emerging from the ark is to sacrifice to God in thanksgiving for his deliverance. To this, God replies with his promise, guaranteed by the reassuring sign of the rainbow, which binds together earth and heaven, a sort of glorious pathway to heaven.

Each of the covenants God makes with his people emerges from evil. There is no pretence that we are not fallible, sinful human beings. Time after time the human partners fail and break the covenant. Time after time God forgives and offers a covenant again, until the new covenant in the blood of Christ. A good way to start Lent, acknowledging our sin and welcoming God's invitation to start again.

Question:

How can Noah's covenant help my Lent?

Second reading:

(1 Peter 3.18-22)

The Pledge of a Good Conscience

Lent reaches its climax with the renewal of our baptismal promises at the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday night. This reading begins to prepare for it.

Noah's emergence to new life from the waters of the Flood (amid devastation and destruction) is compared to, or made a symbol of, emergence to new life from the waters of baptism. Water is the source of all life. Although you don't really appreciate water as the source of life until you have been lost in the desert without any water, getting more and more desperately thirsty and weaker. See a drooping flower revive when it is given a few drops of water!

The waters of baptism are a symbol not only of washing away sin, but more importantly of new life in Christ. To 'baptize' means to 'dip' in water. By baptism we are 'dipped' into Christ's death. We emerge from the water soaked through with the risen life of Christ, so that henceforth Christ is our life. The reading encourages us to prepare for the renewal of this life at Easter by getting our conscience in order. This needs thought, commitment and prayer, so that we are ready with 'the pledge of a good conscience'.

Question:

What are the great symbols of Lent? Is there any modern symbolism like water?

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Gospel:

(Mark 1. 12-15)

Jesus is Tested in the Desert

Each year the gospel reading for this Sunday is about Jesus' testing in the desert. Mark's emphasis is distinctly different from that of Matthew and Luke. No details of the testing, but rather Jesus' sojourn in the desert is rather almost a return to the peace of the Garden of Eden.

The desert of Judea, between Jerusalem and the Jordan Valley, is a noble and dignified solitude of smooth, sandstone hills. Nothing grows, of course, but wild camels and the occasional leopard prowl around. There Jesus was 'with the wild animals' as, led by the Spirit, he made his preparation for his mission.

In what way was he tested? We may presume that in solitude and prayer he was working out the implications of the Voice from Heaven at his Baptism. How was he to run his course as the beloved Servant of the Lord? Precisely how was he to bring the presence Kingship of God into people's lives? The '40' is often used in biblical accounts for a period of preparation, as Israel's 40 years in the desert, or the apostles' 40 days of preparation between Easter and Ascension. We may use our 40 days to reflect on how we may bring God's presence to bear in and through our lives.

Question:

Is testing the most important aspect of Lent?
