

SERMON SUNDAY 21 FEBRUARY 2021

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Genesis 9.8-17; 1 Peter 3.18-22; Mark 1.9-15

Noah was born in the days when people lived a long, long life. He was over 500 years old when his wife gave birth to their three sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth. But they lived in a world where there was great wickedness and violence everywhere. We can all visualise those kind of scenes. Violence is an ugly aspect of human society.

The Lord finally decided to blot out from the earth the human beings he had created, together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air. God told Noah that he was sorry that he had made them and he had decided to destroy them.

But God instructed Noah to make himself an ark from cypress wood and to waterproof it with pitch, inside and out, By this time, Noah had turned 600 years old and his three sons had married, so the family were now eight in all.

The ark took time to build, being the size of a football pitch and about four stories high. Perhaps Noah was often mocked and ridiculed as he built the ark. We can only imagine the unkind comments that may have been made.

But that ark became the family's lifeboat. The Lord told Noah to take his household into it, together with seven pairs of all clean animals and birds and one pair of all unclean animals and birds, male and female, to keep their kind alive. Seven days later, God sent rain that lasted for forty days and forty nights. No one else escaped the waters of the flood, yet those very same waters saved Noah's family, because they were safe inside the lifeboat.

Did Noah ever pray for those disobedient souls who had lost their lives? He was a righteous man, so he probably did. We know that when the floodwaters finally receded, when it was safe to leave the ark, Noah built an altar to the Lord. He offered burnt-offerings on it, which pleased the Lord. That act of worship resulted in God establishing an everlasting covenant with Noah and with his descendants for ever, that never again would there be a flood to destroy the earth. The sign of God's promise is truly everlasting. It's the rainbow in the sky.

This saving by God of Noah and his family through the ark in the floodwaters, is said to foreshadow baptism.



Baptism reminds me of a time when Mike and I went on a study trip to Israel, with staff and students from Lindisfarne College of Theology. One day, we went down to the river Jordan, which separates the country of Israel from the country of Jordan.

David Bryan, our principal, rolled up his trouser legs to his knees and stood in the river, whilst I read from Scripture about Jesus being baptised in the Jordan.

Suddenly a dove flew down and alighted on some of the river reeds. There was a gasp of surprise and delight from the students! Just then, a family of four came along. I briefly chatted with the mum who told me that they were from The Philippines and she had been praying that day to be baptised in the river Jordan. So I pointed her in the direction of David, who was still standing in the river. He made her day by baptising the whole family. It was a Godly moment!



Other godly moments are to be found in Mark's Gospel. This Gospel is not written like a detective story, when we need to read almost to the end in order to solve the mystery. Mark makes it absolutely clear in the first verse of his first chapter, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and he brings good news,

Jesus makes his first appearance from verse nine, he's down at the river Jordan. And Mark covers this baptism in just three verses – obviously a man of few words!

But why did Jesus, the Son of God, need to be baptised at all? Matthew's Gospel provides the answer. John the Baptist knew that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God and so he was reluctant to baptise him. John had previously said to other people 'I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.'

But Jesus reassured John the Baptist, saying 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us, in this way, to fulfil all righteousness.' Only then did John the Baptist consent and baptise Jesus in the waters of the river Jordan.



Just as Jesus came up out of the waters, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descended from heaven on him, like a dove. This was the Holy Spirit, empowering Jesus for ministry. A voice was heard from heaven 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' And so God affirmed the special nature of Jesus' sonship and his pleasure in him.

God also affirms his relationship with us as we seek to love him, with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind. We can expect to hear God through scripture, or through the night as we pray or in a picture. God speaks to us in a variety of ways.

After Jesus was baptised, the Holy Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness, to be tempted by Satan. But whatever temptations with the powers of evil that were to lie ahead, Jesus was spiritually fully equipped to deal with them. The Holy Spirit is our Advocate, Comforter, Counsellor, Enabler, Encourager and Helper and so whatever situation we find ourselves in, we can always trust in God to guide us through it.

To complete his work of salvation it was necessary for Jesus to be sinless in every way. He remained in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights. He was with the wild beasts and the angels waited on him. Mark's Gospel doesn't give us the details of those temptations, but we know that each one was overcome through Jesus using the word of God.



If you ever catch yourself being tempted to say things like 'I'm stupid' or 'I can't do this', just ask yourself what the word of God says. None of us are stupid, because we are all made in the image of God and he's certainly not stupid. And the reason that we often feel unable to do something is because we're suffering from fear, in case we fail or look foolish in front of others, but God's perfect love casts out all fear and Jesus often says, 'Do not be afraid'.

Jesus would go on to preach 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.' He would go on to see John the Baptist arrested and later beheaded.

He would go on to be crucified on a cross, willing to lay down his life for us, that we may have eternal life. He would go on to rise again, to ascend back into heaven and to see the Holy Spirit being poured out from heaven upon humankind. And it didn't end there.

His disciples carried the message on so that others, like us, may also believe. Those disciples included Peter, who received a commandment from Jesus, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

And before Peter wrote even one letter, he would often preach 'Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit' (Acts 2:38).

Repentance means to say sorry to God for the things we have done wrong and to change the direction of our lives in order to face God. It's a joy to be free from sin!

And when we are baptised, we are publicly expressing our trust in the Lord, by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Repentance remained central to Peter's preaching from the day of Pentecost onwards.

God does not give up on us. He is amazingly patient with us. Peter would remember when he asked Jesus how many times a person could be forgiven. He asked if it was as many as seven times, but our Lord Jesus replied, 'No Peter, not seven times, but seventy times seven'.

It was Peter who wrote of Jesus being put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and preached to disobedience spirits in prison. Clement of Alexandria was one of our early Church fathers, who believed the descent of Christ involved the offer of conversion by Christ to those unbelieving souls who had lived in the time of Noah.

The Apostle's Creed confirms that Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried, that he descended to the dead and on the third day He rose again. So Jesus descended to the dead after he had been crucified on Good Friday and before he was resurrected on Easter Sunday.

We don't know exactly what Jesus preached to those disobedient spirits, only God knows that. But we do know that Jesus came to preach good news. John 3:17 says 'God did not send his son Jesus in the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.'

In Peter's day it wasn't unusual for a whole household to be baptised, such as Lydia and her household or the household of Crispus or the household of Stephanas.

When adults are baptized, they are committing themselves to becoming Christians and to following Jesus Christ. When infants and children are baptized, their parents, godparents, and guardians are committing themselves to raising the children as Christians until they are old enough to make their own decision about committing their life to Jesus Christ.

We have been baptised into one body, which we call the church. The Greek word for church is Ecclesia, which means a gathering or assembly of any kind. However the church is different from any other assembly because the church gathers around Jesus. Living the baptised life is not done in a solitary, independent way, but within our community, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Only Jesus Christ could preach to the dead. As for us, we live a baptised life in Christ, so let us continue to preach to the living and carry out the commandment of Jesus to make

disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is both commanded and recommended. So if any of us here this morning have not yet been baptised, and would like to be, please have a chat with Revd Tom. We are all baptised by one Spirit into one body.

Our rule of life reminds us 'We are all on a journey. We are following in the Way behind our founder Jesus Christ... we choose to travel together, to be safe companions, to love, to reach outwards to others, to reach inwards towards Jesus, to share each other's joys and burdens, gifts and needs, food and company and each other's stories... knowing that one day we will all live together with Jesus for ever.

Lent is traditionally a time of baptism preparation, lasting until Easter Sunday, when baptisms would be carried out or baptismal vows renewed. Wouldn't it be wonderful to celebrate new life with those wishing to be baptised!

And for those of us who have been baptised, these words may have been spoken over us:

'In water your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us from the death of sin to newness of life.

We thank you, Father, for the water of baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.'

Truly, truly Jesus came to give us life, life in abundance!

Revd. Rosemary Hendry
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