

1st Sunday of Lent (B)
(Genesis 9:8-15 / Mark 1:12-15)
18.02.2018

In today's gospel passage we see the evangelist Mark's gift to say what is essential in the briefest of ways. In the short extract from chapter one of Mark's gospel we read this morning, the evangelist manages to condense into just two short verses the Temptations of Jesus – something Matthew needs eleven verses to do and Luke thirteen.

Very clearly Mark's aim was to move very quickly into the proclamation of the Good News of the gospel. It is not that he denied the temptations of Jesus, but neither did he dally over them any longer than is absolutely necessary.

Mark clearly considered the trials and temptations Christ endured to be the gateway by which He entered into His mission – not only to announce, but actually to lead His disciples to experience the gift of God's redemption.

The earliest evangelist clearly regarded his mission to be to echo Jesus' very positive gospel message.

Already in today's first reading the scene is set for Mark's positive gospel proclamation by the liturgy's choice of the section from Genesis 9 we heard read a few minutes ago. This text spoke to us of God's Covenant Love by which fallen humanity was offered a fresh start in life. All in all, the Word of God addressed to us this morning speaks to us of **a new beginning**.

Who among us would not say that we would benefit from a fresh start in life?

I believe we should receive the Word of God with the same intention with which it is given to us in this liturgy: as **a word of exhortation and encouragement, inviting us to set out on life's journey refreshed, restored, renewed in grace**.

If in our first reading from the Book of Genesis we heard how God make a covenant with His people, the Church's Eucharistic Prayers remind us that it is again and again that God's covenant with humanity is renewed. In this Eucharist, as in every Eucharist, **what we celebrate is *the new and eternal covenant*** – that is, **the eternally renewed covenant**.

Where we meet Noah and his family in Genesis 9, they are depicted as the only people left on the face of the earth after the flood. An important point is being made here. What is being drawn to our attention here is that the comforts of civilisation had been wiped away. Life as Noah and his family had known it before the flood was gone. This meant that they had no other choice but to start all over again; they were called to begin everything afresh, to get off on a new footing – with God and with each other.

Does it take much imagination for us to see how relevant this story is for us today?

In so many ways society – and Church within society – has undergone something comparable to the great deluge endured by Noah and his family. So much has been washed away that we won't ever retrieve. That may be no bad thing!

The news of recent weeks in our Diocese of Dromore is not far from our spirits. It has shaken and rocked many. It has been like the mighty power of flood-water which, if not properly canalised, can become such destructive force.

Where do we stand in all this? How do we feel?

Do we find ourselves waterlogged, saturated, soaked right through, washed out and unable to move? Or, do we see ourselves – as we should – called to stand before the God of *the new and eternal covenant*, invited by Him to see ourselves situated at a watershed moment right now? I believe the challenge set before us is to see ourselves as men and women and children invited to move on into something new – the new life, to which the Lord calls us. Yes, I believe that we are being called to start all over again, to get off on a fresh footing with Christ.

It seems clear to me that, just as God gave Noah His special blessing and opened up a new way before Him, so He wants to do the same with and for us at this moment in time.

Just as the Lord gave the human race a new start with Noah, so He can give our world, the Church, each one of us, a new start with Christ today.

Of course, our experience of a new beginning depends upon our willingness to enter into the covenant the Lord proposes to us. God will always give new life, but He will never impose it. We must want to live with and for God. We must consent to the gift of life He offers to us.

In today's gospel the theme of a fresh start, a new beginning is also present. The gospel invites us to start afresh with Christ.

Surely we should take that as **an exhortation for this Lenten season the call to begin again.** Lent is a time in which we are called to experience new life with Christ.

Let's dare to ask ourselves this morning: just **what might starting out afresh with Christ imply** for you and for me at this point on our life journey – **what might it look like?**

For most of us it will not involve actually changing course altogether – for example, taking up a new job, changing vocation of whatever. No. **For most of us starting afresh with Christ will mean refreshing our approach and renewing our engagement in the life that is already ours; getting off to a new start there where we are already, in our vocation as it is, whatever it is.**

It will mean renewing our vows, rather than making different vows. So, for example, if we are married it will mean renewing our marriage vows, committing ourselves interiorly to live all that marriage requires of us by way of faithful love. If we are consecrated to the Lord in Monastic or Religious Profession it will mean renewing the commitments that go with the promises we made on our Profession day, so that we may know the joy of vows fulfilled. If in ministry it will mean renewing our commitment to the service of God's people in this capacity. I could go on...

For all of us, whatever our state in life, essentially, getting off to a fresh start with Christ will mean being renewed in our baptismal promises, our commitment to live the Christian life.

Indeed, these Lenten days are a kind of build-up, a progressive lead into the renewal of our baptismal promises in the celebration of the great Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday night. This year at the monastery we will be privileged to welcome a young six year child for baptism – plunging her into the waters of rebirth with Christ.

Although Mark devoted only two short verses to Jesus' temptations, I want to come back to this time of trial in Jesus' life.

The importance of Jesus' temptations cannot – certainly should not – be underestimated. Already at the beginning of last week – commenting on the extracts from the Epistle of James we read in the lectionary readings for the Sixth Week of the Year (Ordinary Time), I drew

attention to what St James had to say about the importance – indeed, the opportunities offered to us by our endurance of trials in life. (Here at the monastery, we listened to an extract from St James' epistle at lauds this morning that came back to this same theme.)

I want to reiterate a point I made on both last Monday and last Tuesday – a fact many of us will know from experience, I expect: it is that **nothing helps better to renew us in our Christian vocation (in life in general) than those painful passages we have had to make through difficult circumstances in life.**

Maybe love was waning in our couple and then our partner or one of our children fell ill or whatever... and with that trial we came to realise how much the love we held for our loved one and what it really meant to us... and, as result, we were renewed in that love.

Maybe our heart had gone out of our commitment to whatever we had vowed ourselves to live and then some difficulty encountered helped us realise how important that commitment actually was and is – and how we were being called to allow ourselves to be renewed in it.

I dare to say this morning that **the difficulties we have all experienced in our personal lives and are still experiencing in our world – as well as the difficulties we have experienced and are still experiencing in the Church – should help make us all the more committed to doing our part to bring about the new life and fresh growth of which all stand in need and for which we long at the deepest level of our being.**

Difficult situations, painful circumstances, require of us all to offer proof of our loving commitment in genuine fidelity to whatever it is that we have been called to be and do.

Might I dare to suggest that we strive to see this present time in which we live as a time when the Spirit is making new life spring forth from the barren earth, thus opening up new possibilities for us?

Yes, we are being called to get off on a fresh footing. We are being invited to work for a more just world – one in which all are respected, their needs recognised and catered for. We are being invited to a more truly gospel-guided Church, a holier Church – a Church which is humbly repentant, a Church which therefore better reflects the Humble Christ and bears witness to true kingdom values... not just in words, but by its whole way of being.

Called to start out afresh with Christ, each one of us must strive to take up the path of conversion and renewal; we must strive to live our life in closer adherence to the Master we are called to follow and serve. We must strive to be a living memorial of Jesus' way of being and acting. That requires of us a deeper intimacy with the Lord. It means walking in constant communion with Him, opening up to His regard every aspect of our lives and asking Him to guide and direct us in all our ways, so that we may act as He would have us do in the concrete circumstances of our existence, in all the many and various situations in which we are involved, and the multiple difficulties with which we are confronted.

When Christ is the light who guides us and God's word is the word that lightens our path, then we will find that our feet will be firmly planted on the ground, but we will look to and draw strength from what is written in the skies. We will keep our eyes fixed on the rainbow of the Covenant – not as a form of escapism, but, so that looking to the sign God has set in the skies we may draw from it the inspiration we need for our lives here below.

Clearly, the covenant God made with His people was a covenant of love.

During this Lenten season what we are being invited to essentially is to be renewed in God's covenant bond with His people, we are being invited to allow ourselves to a renewal in love. That's what **repentance and conversion** are all about: **renewal in love. This is what welcoming the Good News entails: that we welcome God's love in our hearts and reflect that love in the concrete reality of our everyday lives.**

Amen!