

## Readings for the First Sunday in Lent

11<sup>th</sup> February 2024

### First Reading: Genesis 9:8-17

God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.'

God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.' God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'

### Second Reading: 1 Peter 3:18-22

Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

### Gospel: St Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

## A Reflection for the First Sunday in Lent

*From Rev'd David Higgon*

### Hope in Jesus Christ

Revd. Clare in her sermon for Candlemas spoke of the reality that most of us face at some time or another, that we as Christians, are called to hold onto the hope of God's promises, and to hold out the light of hope to others in the darkness of pain and sorrow in the world. However, at times of darkness in our own lives, it can be hard to hang onto that hope, as we carry the light of hope not only for ourselves but also for one another and for all the world.

If you carefully read our bible scriptures for today, they all set out the grounds we have for hope, even in the face of suffering and ecological disaster. In today's world, people may wonder what 'hope' can mean when confronted by the scale of death and violence we see in places like Gaza and the Ukraine, and in the painful images of people facing hunger and death through drought and famine. These events threaten to overwhelm us. Yet as Clare pointed out, we as Christians are called to encourage one another to remain hopeful, even when the darkness threatens to overwhelm us.

So, what is the hope we speak of, what does hope actually mean?

Is it just shorthand for remaining optimistic, and if so what is there to be optimistic about?

Do we believe that God will step in with a miracle?

Do we put our hope in new technology, green consumerism, population control or veganism?

Or is our hope only in an afterlife?

Or is hope only for rich countries and for the people of the world who can afford to protect themselves?

So, what is 'hope'?

Generally, within our culture we speak of hope in two ways, firstly as something we hope **for**, an outcome, a dream and, secondly, as something that we can have hope **in**. Hope **in** something we do or hope **in** human creativity.

Hope as something we hope **for**, is often reflected in western society as the hope that human improvement will be achieved through the conquest of nature, and it infects our Christian thinking that somehow God is the guarantor of progress. Hope **for** something can easily tip into despair if through world events, through war or climate change, that progress cannot be sustain and we cannot see a future for ourselves and our children, because what we have hoped **for** fails to materialise, then despair can soon become the companion to hope.

Hope **in** something may focus on a human activity like planting a tree, or to hope in human creativity, or divine providence. These are things that are right to do for their own sakes, but hope in something is also vulnerable to despair when it seeks an outcome. Will there ever be enough people willing to change the way we live today? is there enough time? Hope in something can be a place we retreat to when what we have hoped for has collapsed.

You have heard the expression of something or someone as being **beyond** hope. Paradoxically this points to what Christian hope is. There is Hope **beyond**. Hope beyond is not what society understands by hope. It is not hope for the future, it is hope for the present. It recognises the reality of the predicament we face in the world we live in today and it will not draw us on what the future holds. A Christian understanding of hope is that of looking forward to the

fulfilment of God's creation, confident in the memory of what God has already achieved in Jesus Christ. On the basis of this memory handed from generation to generation, we look forward to the redemption of all people which begun in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as we look forward in anticipation to the completion of that redemption.

This Christian understanding of hope is a hope we express every time we pray the Lord's Prayer. When we pray the Lord's Prayer we hope for Hope Beyond, for absolute redemption, *Thy Kingdom Come*, and also we hope for the present, for the necessity of life here and now, *Give us today our daily bread*. Our hope for today's worldly needs, and our hope for the world's redemption, are bound together in one indivisible hope.

Christian hope is not gained through looking around the world for unambiguous grounds for optimism. It is something we learn by recognising the limitations of all our current seeing and knowing, and by anticipating the fulness of our life in God as something yet to come. As St Paul said, *now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. 1. Cor 13 12-13.*

'Hope is an attitude in which we dare to commit ourselves to that which is radically beyond our control.' (Karl Rahner)  
Our hope is indivisible from the Christian memory of Jesus Christ and that memory of Jesus Christ is our hope.

With this hope we can navigate the collapsing certainties and surging crises of our times with composure and calmness. Hope **beyond** frees us to dream, to plan and to build, even if we accept that we may still fail.

Christian hope is not passive, it is active. It engages deeply with issues, and it seeks solutions, rather than waiting for something better to come along, or for someone else to provide an answer. It is hope grounded in wisdom, imagination and love. it asks, what are the possibilities in the situations we find ourselves in? what is the roadmap for a different future?

In Christian belief every human is made in the 'image of God', so we possess creative attributes. We have the ability to think about the past, present and future, and we have the capacity for moral and spiritual reflection and growth. Being made in the image of God includes compassion, love, truth, wisdom, mercy, justice, foresight, courage and creativity.

These are all qualities that can be exercised and nurtured, and these are qualities that can bring hope where at first glance there is none. Such hope requires strength and courage, and it can create new and creative responses to the world's biggest challenges.

It is a hope that creates connections and community, it imagines and works for a better world, even when this requires sacrifice, or makes us unpopular. Everyone can join in. it is a hope that is rooted in love and faith, as there is no hope without love, and there is neither hope nor love without faith.