

Genesis 9: 8 – 17; 1 Peter 3: 18 – end; Mark 1: 9 – 15

So today is the first Sunday in Lent – the time when we'd usually give something up – to prepare ourselves for Easter.

Interestingly this is a concept that has broken free from the original intention – the preparation idea, and instead become some sort of personal challenge.

For me over the years I've given up various things, I've given up crisps, sweets, or biscuits, or coffee. One year I gave up meat – the vegetarian bacon was an experience I hope to forget.... I've given up everything to drink except water. I've even done a couple of short fasts – as in given up everything!

But it always felt like a challenge, it felt like I was doing it “just to say I did” a friend of mine once gave something up for Lent and every time they broke their Lent they'd start again, they'd start the 40 days all over! I think this meant they finished their 'Lent' sometime after Easter! Now I'm not trying to run this friend down – they were doing it to discipline themselves but I wonder if it begins to slip into the personal challenge category – where we try and keep Lent to be proud of ourselves, even if we aren't showing off to others ...

That's not what Lent is supposed to be I don't think. I think Lent is about preparing ourselves for Easter ... it's a period of time where we choose to give something up in order to focus ourselves on God – whenever you reach for the chocolate biscuits it should remind you to reach for God instead.

Although this year I think it feels a bit like we've been in Lent for a year. We've “given up” social interaction, hugs, seeing our families, shaking hands, going to the gym or theatre ...

As I said though – Lent is a time of preparation, preparing for something – preparing for Easter, for the coming celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus that leads to our freedom, our chance to start again.

It's a bit like our Old Testament passage – the rainbow after the flood that promised something new, a new way of interacting with God – God enters into a promise with Noah and the world that never again will he flood the earth – and a promise, a covenant like that implies an interaction, a relationship.

So in the middle of the storm, that is Covid, we can be looking for the rainbow, the promise, the hope – in the middle of Lent we can be looking for the hope of salvation found in Jesus.

As it says just before our reading this morning – “Prepare the way of the lord make his paths straight.” John the Baptist was preparing the way for the coming Messiah, the new promise the new covenant, our Saviour – Jesus. And he was calling people to repent, to be forgiven of sins. And baptising them.

Now I was thinking about this, and for your average Jew there was already prescribed offerings and ways of proclaiming the forgiveness of sins – it usually involved some form of sacrifice, some birds or a choice bull. There was even already a form of baptism that cleansed people

So this baptism, what marked it out was perhaps something more. This baptism was not just a baptism of repentance of personal or social sins but perhaps a baptism of repentance of being a part of a system that was unjust – a system where if you fell outside of prescribed patterns, then you were out. Think about the lepers, the blind, the woman who had bled for 12 years, all excluded ... the tax collectors, the law-breakers, the sinners – they had no chance in the temple 'system,' there was no grace, only law.

And at times we fall into the same trap, we fit our own laws to determine who is 'in' or 'out' ... we look down on people who break Covid laws, who buy all the loo rolls or who fight over pasta – and yes it is frustrating and we do need to pay attention to the laws given, and think about ensuring safety and provision for everyone ... but sometimes those who break these restrictions or act in such ways we immediately “cast out” and some of the attacks and hatred I've seen from those who 'think they are better' has really shown the 'ugly side' of our nature.

We decide to make Lent about “give this up or else you fail” instead of a grace-filled “I'm choosing to set this aside to focus on God, if I get it wrong, I give in, I can try again.”

So this baptism was a visible sign of a change in attitude ... a change in attitude from law, to grace, from the Old Covenant to the New in preparation for the coming Messiah. But that coming Messiah also gets baptised. Did he need a change in attitude? Was Jesus' attitude wrong? Had he been a law-not-grace kind of person?

I don't think so. I think Jesus being baptised here is him 'joining' with the rest of those being baptised to say – we think things need to be different. We want to prepare ourselves for the coming of the new Kingdom of God, and this is a sign of it. And then – dramatically the sky splits open – the heavens are torn apart – this tearing apart I hope reminds you of another tearing – a tearing of the veil in **Mark chapter 15** – at the point of Jesus' death the curtain in the temple is torn in two, top to bottom!

I think the symbolism here is the same – the symbolism of the torn veil is: “through the death of Jesus' atonement for sins – forgiveness of sins, is available for all, Jew and Gentile and access to God, to a relationship with God, is open to all”

And here the tearing of the heavens has the same significance. The Jewish people believed that prophecy, and access to God and his Spirit had ceased with the last of the prophets – see **Malachi 4**, the heavens were “closed” as it were until the end times. But now the heavens were opened and God's Spirit was descending. And in the words: **“baptism of”** – or if you have a bible with footnotes **“in the Spirit”** we see that this descending of the Spirit was not a temporary thing, but a deeper, longer lasting, permanent thing. Baptised “into” the Spirit – to be part of God's Spirit, to have God's Spirit part of us. This is revolutionary – this is incredible, and this is freely given. The Spirit descending onto Jesus, visible to all around shows the start of this baptism of the Spirit, and a promise that it will be available for all ... **“He will baptise you in the Spirit”**.

The veil torn in two at the death of Jesus shows the fulfilment of this promise.

In between these two “tearing” moments we have Jesus' ministry. This is the start, Mark 15 is the end – but it is also the start of a new era – the coming of God's kingdom – the start of the kingdom of grace and not of law.

Immediately the Spirit sends Jesus into the wilderness. The 40 days could be literal – as we take them to be for Lent, it could be symbolic of the 40 years of the wilderness wanderings of Israel or it could just indicate a long period of time – and Mark in fact skims over the testing of Jesus – but it informs the rest of the gospel – such as in **Mark 3** when it speaks of Jesus having confronted the prince of demons and is “plundering his house” Jesus has won the battle over darkness, and invites us and shows us how to be a part of this “new way” the Kingdom of God.

These times can feel like a wilderness, a time of testing, a time of strangeness! But it's also I think an opportunity to take it as a time of “Lent” a time of preparing, a time of getting ready ... of thinking about grace, and about the coming Kingdom ... of hoping for the coming times – the time when there won't be such restrictions, death and fear, darkness and isolation – and preparing ourselves now for the future, preparing our attitudes, our attitudes towards others, or our attitude towards this planet and it's resources.

We so often took all these things for granted and if this time has taught us anything it's that life is precious, people are precious, this planet is precious.

But also to be preparing to be people who, baptised in the Spirit, proclaim that Jesus has overcome, freedom has come, God's Kingdom is coming, and has come – and we are all invited to be in a relationship with the one who created the earth – to prepare to be people who demonstrate the power and the love of God through all we say and do.

We look for the rainbow after the storm, for the hope after the flood of Covid, and for the Kingdom of God and the promises of a renewed and restored earth to come free from mourning, pain, even death to share in the eternal life of the resurrection of Jesus.

Amen.