

## **Lent 1**

*A sermon preached at the parish church of St Andre de la Pommeraye Guernsey on 18 February 2018 by the Rector, the Very Revd Tim Barker*

*Readings: Genesis 9.8-17 and Mark 1.9-15*

The story of Noah features in the Hebrew scriptures as a means of establishing the relationship between God and all people. Unlike what happens later with Moses and Abraham, this covenant does not depend upon any action on the part of the human partner. God's promise is to all people on the earth. The rainbow is the sign of his undertaking to guarantee the natural order, so that men and women may live on the earth and expect the seasons to come and go, the crops to grow and the food cycle to be maintained. The whole story is dependent upon that of the Flood; but the new relationship with humanity marks a new beginning for God and humankind, for God perceives that there is a flaw in the human race; the flip side, if you like, of our being created in his image, which means that the free will God gives us can be a dangerous liability, a weapon with the potential for great destruction, as we have seen too often in human history.

And even when we become Christians, when we take seriously the fact that God is willing to have a covenant, a relationship, with us, we can't avoid the fact that things go wrong in our spiritual lives.

If we own a car, we know that it needs regular servicing. A computer has to be scanned for viruses and unwanted files deleted so that it continues to work properly. Even spectacles or hearing aids have to be checked. These things are important for transport, work and health.

What about our spiritual health? Just as a car can break down, a computer go on the blink, or a prescription for spectacles become out of date, so our Christian life can find itself in the wilderness, not knowing which way to turn, having lost sight of God and of the vision that once was ours.

Many people experience loneliness, despair and a loss of faith. The temptation comes to make life easy, to reject our calling, to use our abilities in the wrong way. That is like being in the wilderness – when we need our our servicing, our check-up. Every year Lent arrives to give us this opportunity.

When we were confirmed, ordained, admitted to membership, converted or baptised as an adult, we knew that God was close. We may have experienced a definite sense of being called. It may have happened a long time ago and perhaps we have lost some of the vision that was evident then.

Our prayers may have become less of a conversation with God. Receiving Holy Communion may have become a ritual rather than an inspirational and wonderful experience. Our reading of the Bible may have lapsed. Our standards of honesty, purity, generosity and kindness may have diminished. Baptism has not inoculated us against these things – it didn't remove temptation for Jesus either.

Jesus' baptism was not needed. He didn't require a washing away of his sin. He had nothing of which to repent. But he shows his support of John's call to the Jews of his time by sharing in this rite of renewal, and sharing the demand that John makes - that people change their life style; that the soldiers stop bullying; that the tax collectors be just; that food and clothes be shared with those who have none.

Jesus' temptations were different – his ministry would be made much easier if he used his power in the wrong way, by looking to his own comfort, or putting on a series of tricks to attract attention. Or, for that matter, by compelling people to follow him. These are the details

we find in Matthew's and Luke's accounts of Jesus' temptation; Mark is in too much of a hurry to take us on to Jesus' teaching to spend time on the detail.

During Lent, we may do rather ordinary things like deciding to give up alcohol or chocolate. These may make us more healthy, and allow us to practice and demonstrate self-control, but don't contribute directly to our spiritual growth. On the other hand, a Christian Lent gives us the opportunity for quiet, undemonstrative, self-examination to make sure that we are in good spiritual health.

Each one of us is aware of those parts of our lives where renewal and change are necessary, or where we have lost the vision that we once had in our prayers, sacramental life, morality and knowledge of God. We know those parts of our lives which are 'in the wilderness' and which need to be checked.

Our car may grind to a halt or its brakes fail. Our computer may suddenly freeze and cause us to lose the work we have just completed. Our aids to health may run down, simply because we have failed to service them. In the same way, our spiritual life may be in danger of getting out of control because we have forgotten the pattern that John the Baptist and Jesus have set before us. Lent can be a time to find again our vision of God - to come out of the wilderness and make the changes that we know are necessary in our Christian life.

Mark's account of Jesus' baptisms and temptations is nothing if not stark. Some might describe it as bleak. Mark leaves us in no doubt that, when God engages with humanity, there is struggle and hardship. The story of the flood and Noah's difficulties remind us again of that, as does our own experience.

We who seek to follow in Jesus' way must be willing to line ourselves up with Jesus and follow his steps, if we want to take seriously God's call to us.