

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT — February 18th, 2018

Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15



1ST READING

A Reading from the Book of Genesis

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."

GENESIS 9:8-17

PSALM 25:1-9

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- 1 To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul; my God, I put my trust in you; * let me not be humiliated, nor let my enemies triumph over me.
- 2 Let none who look to you be put to shame; * let the treacherous be disappointed in their schemes.
- 3 Show me your ways, O Lord, * and teach me your paths.
- 4 Lead me in your truth and teach me, * for you are the God of my salvation; in you have I trusted all the day long.
- 5 Remember, O Lord, your compassion and love, * for they are from everlasting.
- 6 Remember not the sins of my youth and my transgressions; * remember me according to your love and for the sake of your goodness, O Lord.
- 7 Gracious and upright is the Lord; * therefore he teaches sinners in his way.
- 8 He guides the humble in doing right * and teaches his way to the lowly.
- 9 All the paths of the Lord are love and faithfulness * to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.

God of compassion and love, forgive our sins, relieve our misery, satisfy our longing, and fulfil all our hopes for peace; through your Son Jesus Christ our Redeemer.

2nd READING

A Reading from the First Letter of Peter

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.

1 PETER 3:18-22

GOSPEL READING

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ According to Mark

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."

MARK 1:9-15

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."

It has been a long time since anyone saw a large crowd gathering to take part in an Ash Wednesday worship service. For many, the demands of life are heavy enough to make going to yet another church service look more like a chore than a spiritual event. And I am no one to criticize. We never had Ash Wednesday services in the church in which I was raised.

And then there is the image of what is to be presented. An inventory of our spiritual shortcomings and calls for repentance. Somehow, these are not easy items to promote among the general public. They seem to be leftovers from another era when our culture was quite different.

But the world is again changing. We are entering yet another new era. People are now more inclined to rely on the fruits of technology, popular wisdom, and corporate suggestion to guide their life decisions and the nature of their goals.

Countless judgments are being made each day. And we are left with an underlying unease. Things may be good in some ways. But the overall drift of things seems to be that we feel at sea — some would say going in a negative direction!

To the casual observer it seems that while many people do in fact benefit as time goes by, all too many do not. So it is that we hear of disturbing phenomena like a growing gap between the rich and the poor. Related to this, we hear of the rapid shrinking of the middle class. As the number of rich people increase, we see even more people join the ranks of the poor. This puts additional strain on our social support systems. And this leads to more complaints about the public monies spent in attempts to see to some of their basic needs.

In western society, we seem to be witnessing more people in need and at the same time more able people not wanting to help those less fortunate. And we have to ask the questions that are so appropriate to Lent about *who are we?* and *who are we becoming?* These are not just academic sociological questions. They are required of us if we want to live our lives with a strong sense of truth!

Enter Jesus! He has just been baptized by John. As he is coming out of the water a voice comes from heaven above him. It is the voice of God saying: *"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

Other than making a big impression on all who were there, why is this so important? Well when our Lord walked the earth, there were a dozen or so other men also walking around also claiming to be the messiah. If you were an average Jewish person living at that time, how would you know who to follow? — if anyone? All would have their own message & logic. Their appearance might hold a clue — or maybe not. Their attitude toward money could also be a clue — maybe. Even their attitude toward violence would not be too helpful; because the popular wisdom of the day expected the messiah to be advocating the restoration of Israel by armed rebellion.

Then there is Jesus. He may have seemed to be ready for his ministry. But what would set him apart from the others? Getting baptised by John? — maybe. His ability to melt into the crowds? — probably not. His message? — perhaps.

The list can go on and on. Something was needed to erase potential doubts. It had to be something more; and that something would have to have been witnessed! Yes, the validation had to come in a way that was unique, powerful, and not able to be imitated by anyone else. So it is that we read: *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."*

We are thus to be given to know that with Jesus, we have the authentic messiah and are to pay attention to his word. Jesus' message is well worth listening to. He is of God; he is of truth — God's truth! Followers of Christ as God's Son are called to be a people of God. That is who we are to be!

The Old Testament reading for Ash Wednesday is from Isaiah. In it we find an insightful description of what it is that God is looking for God's people to be. Listen to some of what God is saying to us through the prophet Isaiah in Chapter 58.

*Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.*

God's people are those who are there for others when a need arises. That is who we are to be. Jesus tells us that the most important thing for us is to be a loving people. Oh how the world needs more and more examples of what lives of love look like. We all show our love in differing ways as differing needs arise. The early Christians were called *The people of the Way*. There was something different about how they lived and showed their unconditional love. We too, are to be *people of the way*.

In a world which seems to be coming increasingly self-centred and mean-spirited, as *people of the way* we can best proclaim our faith through our actions. That is who we are to be. The world will take notice more than we may think. And for many, that will be a truly good thing! — today, tomorrow and always.

Amen.