

1ST SUNDAY OF LENT YEAR B HOMILY ESSENDON 2021
REPENT AND BELIEVE: GOD'S KINGDOM IS NEAR
Mk 1.12-15 Gen 9.8-15 1Pt 3.18-22

Back into action, after an *ashless* Wednesday for starters, and we could only have sprinkled them on our heads to mess up our hair, given instructions from Rome, due to the continuing pandemic, maybe being reminded of the symbolism is sufficient for this year, almost a year now since our big local lockdown started from 19th March. And so, the penitential season is on. Our concrete reminder is Project Compassion, with boxes or envelopes to take and make a regular contribution towards the many good works of Caritas Australia, of which we'll hear real life accounts of where our support is realized at the grass roots level.

Firstly, however, we need to take a look at Mark's introduction to Jesus' public ministry, as we once again go back to chapter 1 of his Gospel, following John the Baptist's front-line appearance in paving the way. The age old clash between good and evil is portrayed here as Jesus confronts Satan, symbolic of evil personified. The temptations are not detailed by Mark, as they are in Matthew and Luke, but the clear message is that Jesus is not held back by doubt, fear or weakness, and is single-minded in his mission to proclaim that the time to repent and believe his Good News is now, as he first prepares by withdrawing into the wilderness, where the wild things are! 40 days now is what we face up to in preparing to celebrate his Passion, Death and Resurrection in this time of anticipation this Lent.

In some ways it was easier in the old days to observe the external regulations, which identified Catholics, the daily fasting for those between 18 and 59, no meat on Fridays (now only Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, if we remember, and I do like fish anyway!!), and then the custom which endures today, of trying to give up something for a good cause, self-discipline and generosity of spirit or charity. I remember being shocked as a young chap at people who still ate lollies and chocolate, even icecream and chewing gum, in Lent, when I was firmly conditioned to give it up at primary school in the early 1960's, and at home. (Having now lost my sweet tooth, and quite a few of my own top deck, perhaps from youthful overindulgence, it's no great penance at all!) In Grade 5 we had a project book, which I still have somewhere in my chaotic archives, outlining the Catholic Lenten rules, with pictures of Elizabeth Taylor and Frank Sinatra or was it Mickey Rooney (*with their multiple marriages, of which I wasn't aware at the time!*) as images of people who fitted the age categories for restrictions! But don't we know, it's attitude which counts these days.

And we have the origins of the rainbow in Genesis today, as Noah's Ark fills up with pairs of all creatures, limiting future genetic diversity, with a promise of no more floods. (The theme endures, if you remember *Evan Almighty*, the 2007 epic fantasy disaster comedy with Steve Carrell and Morgan Freeman as God?). Then I have children's picture books titled *Trouble in the Ark* and *The Dove* (*show and tell – no time to read here!*), which provide amusing and entertaining variations on the theme. God's promise to Noah is for an enduring Covenant of love for his people to live life well, according to his will. As Brendan Byrne SJ puts it: ***“God's renewed intent is to communicate life and blessing, rather than destruction.”***

We do know, however, it's not as simple as that, in our fragile and imperfect world, our precious planet, with ongoing floods, fires, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and plagues, such as the pandemic. It's our responsibility to reduce the risks and rescue the afflicted where we can. Human nature is still a long way from achieving the goal of universal peace and understanding in our conflicted world. (*And planet Mars, 4th rock from the Sun, is hardly a practical alternative, as yet another lander hits the surface there to explore the barren planet and seek signs of any life, if just a trace of water! Moreover, if you've seen the 2015 movie drama, **The Martian**, with Matt Damon, you'd realize it's not a fun place to live!*) At the same time, the Kingdom Jesus speaks of is one where you and I have a part to play in our lives and environment.

I like how Claude Mostowik MSC speaks of today's story from Genesis: *“The Noah myth... depicts a God who desires the flourishing of life on Earth. The story is one of re-creation, where things are put together again by healing and reconciliation. The hovering 'dove' bids us come ashore in peace, to cease from our forgetfulness, to end the violence – whether in our bedrooms, homes, workplaces, community, nation or between nations.. **The image of the Ark tells us that we're all in the same boat.**”*

Jesus takes time out to contemplate, pray and so prepare, but he's soon into positive action, in word and deed, as we've already heard in the early stages of Mark's Gospel. And so our continuing mission as his followers is to ***Repent and believe the Gospel***, or, as the alternative, more ominous formula for Ash Wednesday is ***Remember that we are dust, and unto dust we shall return***, a sobering reminder of our mortality, but a positive challenge to each of us too, that we are to live the Gospel as Good News in our lives, in the meantime, here and now.

And now we have a short AV reflection on life in Bangladesh with Jamila, a Rohingya refugee and single mother aged 22, from Myanmar (formerly Burma).

The Project Compassion theme for this Lent of 2021 is “*Be more*”, taken from Oscar Romero's words: “*Aspire not to have more, but to be more.*” Jesus' proclamation in today's Gospel is that the Kingdom of God is near at hand. Our support for Project Compassion is one practical way of making that Kingdom coming closer. So don't forget your envelopes or boxes, or credit card or on-line donations to this cause.

john hannon

21st February 2021