

Sunday, February 21st. 2021. Lent 1

Genesis 9, 8-17, Psalm 25, 1-9, Mark 1, 9-15

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you are starting a new job, in which you, as the boss, will have people working under you, you will have to have a clear policy, which may be different from that of your predecessor. In school with a new class, you will need to set your stall up at the start, avoid being over-familiar with the pupils, so that they know what will be expected of them. It is tempting to be over-friendly, but that leads to disaster!

Today's Gospel passage sees Jesus at the start of his ministry. What Jesus did before this event is of no interest to Mark. A problem occurs, in that John's baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and the inference may be that Jesus had repented and was seeking forgiveness. The other problem is that this event puts Jesus in an inferior position to John. However, Mark is painting a picture where Jesus is being prepared for his ministry, in which he will identify with his people, and therefore he submits himself to the same ceremonies, in which the people take part.

In Mark's version Jesus alone sees the heavens torn apart and the descent of the dove, and he is the only one who hears the voice. This suggests his being prepared for a special ministry. The words spoken by the voice reflect Psalm 2, 'You are my Son; this day have I begotten you', words used during the coronation of a king in Israel.

Nowadays, we, too, have to be able to identify with the people we work with or the pupils we teach, in order to be able to understand their problems and concerns and to help them to develop.

The temptation of Jesus is only briefly told in Mark, elaborated in Matthew and Luke, but omitted entirely in John. It shows the danger of temptation to go a different way from the way of God, perhaps choosing a more popular way, and it also reveals Jesus' battle with evil.

As we reveal our policy, we may face opposition and may be tempted to give in and go a different way, too.

The final part sees Jesus beginning his ministry, remaining resolute, proclaiming the good news of God, clearly what he was sent to do, and preaching the hope of God's kingdom, where evil would be overcome. His first hearers are exhorted to repent, change direction and believe.

Why does Jesus do all this? It goes back to the first reading, where God is portrayed as establishing a covenant with his people. A covenant

is made to clarify a relationship between two parties and puts an obligation on each. We still do this. Some years ago, a covenant was established between St. Michael's, Amersham Free Church and St. John's Methodist Church, and the joint activities, which take place each year, reflect the terms of that covenant. Sometimes we covenant a sum of money to an organisation, and there are rules to respect the terms of such an arrangement.

In the case of the story of Noah, the sign of the rainbow is a reminder of the existence of the covenant relation. If we make a covenant, there is paperwork to prove its existence. Jesus comes to continue that covenant relationship between God and his people.

All this is beautifully summed up in Psalm 25. The psalmist has been attacked by enemies, who have isolated him and plunged him into despair. He wonders if he is being punished for present and past sins, but he can approach God, who has revealed himself in the covenant as a God of forgiveness, who saves the afflicted and removes barriers. So, he asks to be shown the way of God:

'Make me to know your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation.'

He knows that God is a God of compassion and love, gracious and upright, who will guide his people in the right way, because he is a God of mercy and truth:

'Remember, Lord, your compassion and love, for they are from everlasting. Gracious and upright is the Lord; therefore shall he teach sinners in the way. He will guide the humble in doing right and teach his way to the lowly.'

That is what is revealed by Jesus in his teaching and dealing with people. During Lent, we are encouraged to discover more about the nature of God by looking more deeply into the character of Jesus, looking at the way he dealt with people and how he revealed God's love for all, how he battled with those, who opposed him and who wanted to go a different way. We shall see how he taught his disciples to be servants, and how he sought to bring us back to that covenant relationship with God by dying for us and rising again, revealing the resurrection by being present with us for ever.

Our Lent course, Live Lent, has as its subtitle, 'God's story, our story'. It reminds us of Eucharistic Prayer D, in which, when the bread and wine are consecrated, the story of Jesus becomes **our story**. During Lent we are encouraged to do all we can to remain faithful to the covenant between God and his people, as illustrated in the story of Noah. God will

always keep his side of the covenant. Can we keep our responsibility and be part of his great story?

Our special prayer for Lent could therefore usefully be this verse from Psalm 25:

'Let integrity and uprightness preserve me for my hope has been in you.'

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.