

**The 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent (B); “Water, water everywhere”; but does it help? 1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Genesis 9:8-15: The rainbow: a sign of God’s promise to Noah; 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: 1 Peter 3:18-22: God now saves us by the water of Baptism; Gospel: Mark 1:12-15: Mark’s very brief reference to Jesus’ temptations.**

We must be going through one of the soggiest periods in recent years: the countryside is saturated. However, rainbows - and the wetness that causes them - are the theme of the first two readings. The ancient myth of the flood was seared into the minds of the Hebrews, (and archaeology shows that there really had been one); they saw it as punishment for sin, but a disaster that God promised he would never repeat. The rainbow was the symbol of that promise. St Peter’s letter sees the flood-water as a symbol of the purifying nature of Christian Baptism; this does not wash physical dirt, but ‘bathes’ us - and the pun is intended - in the new life of the risen Christ.

What is the relevance of this to us in Lent? Except for its drawn-out link to Baptism, the 1st reading does not seem to say much to us these days. Another problem: very few remember their own baptism – I envy those who are baptized as adults: it is a lovely and meaningful ceremony. People of my age were baptized when tiny - at about at one or two weeks old, in case the baby died - along with other babies at the same time, in a Latin ceremony. St Peter means that, just as the water of the great flood cleared sinners out of the world, so now, the water of Baptism allows us to access God’s love and life.

The next question is: how does Baptism allow us to “access God’s love and life”? It was originally a Jewish purification ritual; Jesus accepted it; he urged his followers to do the same, and so the very early Church took it over as the initiation into Christian life. The symbolism of the water was more obvious then, since people used to go down into a pool or river, and come out baptized. Thus, it was easier then to see how we share in Jesus’ death (down into the tomb) and resurrection - the two things that help us spiritually. But how do they help us spiritually? This takes us to the essence of being a Christian. St Peter writes in this week’s 2<sup>nd</sup> reading: *“Christ himself, innocent though he was, died once for sins; died for the guilty, to lead us to God. In the body, he was put to death; in the spirit, he was raised to life.”*

The idea of an innocent person offering his death as a way to ‘lead us to God’ was strange to Old Testament Jews – but not unknown. The four “Songs of the Suffering Servant” in Isaiah mention this idea, and it is how Jesus (and the early Church) interpreted his suffering and death. It was not a case of an angry God wanting to punish someone, so He picked on his sinless Son; it was a loving God wanting to show an indifferent human race how much we were loved, and asking us to respond by being sorry for our sins, and loving God and each other. Old devotions such as Sacred Heart (pierced by the soldier’s lance) Precious Blood (spilled by the wounds) and Holy Cross (the wooden gibbet of Jesus’ execution) help us to understand how much Jesus suffered as a human being; but

we must be careful not to say that God the Father rejoiced in his Son's agony. He let these things be done to Jesus by the grim penal system of the time to show us love, He was not a cruel Father who exacted some sort of vengeance. In that death on the cross, we find forgiveness & hope.

In Lent, we are asked to make choices – as Jesus was. St Mark merely tells us: “*The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness*” (a sort of enforced retreat), where he was “*tempted by Satan*”. Nothing else. Matthew & Luke tell us that he had to choose what sort of Messiah he was to be – a soft, selfish one? A political-power one? A spiritually dominant one? In itself, temptation, no matter how forceful, is not sinful. Serious (‘mortal’) sin comes when we make bad choices, in important matters, with real consent and knowledge. (That bit of old-style RC morality is often forgotten these days.) Apart from the usual human weakness temptations, Jesus had to decide whether or not to misuse his divine power – a situation not unlike ours. Many of you reading this will have influence over other people – in family, at work, with friends, etc; how you choose to use that influence depends on your conscience. We can easily slip into the habit of using influence for our own benefit, convenience or pleasure, rather than for the good of others. The result: we make some choices from bad (or at least mixed) motives. In Lent, it is worth asking honestly why we do things.

But we should not be negative, despite the terrible wars in recent months. Watching the TV news can make us wonder at times if there is any hope for the future. We cannot do much about the mess the world is in – just hope and pray for better leadership. But at a personal level, God knows us better than we know ourselves, and that we are weak humans. As a rule, most do the right things for mainly right reasons. We do not need to be “driven into the wilderness”; but we could spend a few moments each day seeing in which direction our lives are going – and why we are going there. Some of our bad habits are not desperately evil, but they can influence the choices we make, and keep God at arm's length. Some food for thought there? Happy Lent! *Fr Jim Dunne.*