

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Genesis 9:8-15; Psalm 25 [24]; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:12-15

The time is fulfilled: the kingdom of God has come near

Mark 1:12 And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. 13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Mark 1:14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; convert, and believe in the good news." (NRSV adjusted)

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The accounts of the temptation of Jesus are found in the first three Gospels. The version in Mark is the shortest and both Matthew and Luke offer an expanded conversation in the form of a rabbinic debate based on texts from Scripture (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). The Letter to the Hebrews also preserves a memory of the testing of Jesus.

KIND OF WRITING

This little passage is actually made up of two scenes. The first scene is part of what is found traditionally in stories of heroes: the testing of the hero before he begins his work (vv. 12-13).

The second scene is a kind of synthesis or very brief *epitome*, giving the readers the core of Jesus' proclamation in as few words as possible.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The forty years in the wilderness

The wilderness as the place of temptation echoes Israel's wandering for forty years before entering the promised land.

Surely the LORD your God has blessed you in all your undertakings; he knows your going through this great wilderness. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing. (Deuteronomy 2:7)

Remember the long way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. (Deuteronomy 8:2)

Good news / gospel

The expression "good news" is a translation of *euaggelion*. This noun reflects a special use in the language of Second and Third Isaiah (40-55, 56-66) where it is always a verb.

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." (Isaiah 52:7)



The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners. (Isaiah 61:1)

The background is the return from the Babylonian Exile (587-539 BC). The "good news" then was God's initiative in bringing about the return and restoration of Israel.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Proclaim is a technical term for *effective proclamation*. The early Christian word "*kerygma*" comes from it. It is frequent in the Gospels (9-14-9-0). As noun and verb, gospel occurs frequently (5-8-10-0).

Thought for the day

In Italian, Lent is *quaresima* or forty (days). In German, it is *Fastenzeit* or time for bodily restraint. Our English word comes from an older Anglo-Saxon word for spring—*len(c)ten*—whence our Lent. Italian tells us how long it will last (with its symbolic overtones). German tells us what to do in that time. But English tells us *what is supposed to happen*, that is, we are supposed to experience a springtime of faith, a time growth and new life.

Prayer

God of new life, bless us on our pilgrim way towards the great feast of Easter. Help us to know our need of your presence, breathe your Spirit into our reading of the Word, teach us to set aside whatever hinders our true discipleship so that we may come to life in abundance and know in our hearts the joy of the Gospel. Amen.

Kingdom of God is likewise frequent (5-14-32-2) as is kingdom of heaven (x 34 in Matthew only). The language of convert (better, as always, than "repent") is found rarely enough in the Gospels (5-2-9-0), but is clearly central to Jesus' preaching. Believe is increasingly important, with a very special frequency in the Fourth Gospel. (11-14-9-98). All of this shows just how much this text is an epitome of both Jesus' preaching and the language of early Christianity.

Two texts from Hebrews are relevant.

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. *Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help*

those who are being tested. (Hebrews 2:14-18)

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, *but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.* Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:14-16)

ST PAUL

No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it. (1Corinthians 10:13)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 12 Although this is still within the first chapter of Mark, this is the third mention of the Spirit. The verb used is very strong: literally, the Spirit threw him out into the wilderness. The wilderness is the place of both test and encounter with God, in the biblical tradition.

Verse 13 The language here is metaphorical: forty = resumption of Israel’s time in the desert; Satan = encounter with evil; wild beasts = temptations; angels = God’s presence. This testing is a preparation for the ministry, which very explicitly in Mark takes on the forces of evil:

And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.’ And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, ‘How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying

up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered. Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin’— for they had said, ‘He has an unclean spirit.’ (Mark 3:22-30)

Verse 14 Because Jesus was a follower of John the Baptist, his ministry starts only when it is impossible for John himself to continue. Jesus’ own preaching resembles that of John in content and vocabulary. However, Jesus preaches God’s compassionate love in contrast to judgement and condemnation.

Verse 15 Time = the *kairos* (not *chronos*) the time of special intervention from God. The coming near of the kingdom will be realised in Jesus’ healing and table-fellowship. Eventually, it became clear that the kingdom would come not only through the ministry but also through the person of Jesus.

The sequence here is important: gift (the kingdom) and response (conversion). God already accepts us before we convert, as St Paul notes in Romans “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8). Repent, literally *metanoieite*, means to take on a new way of looking at things, change in world view. Convert is always a better translation.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. We are at a major turning point in the life of Jesus when he is about to start his public ministry. Mark tells us this was preceded by a deep inner struggle when his resolve to take on his God-given mission was tested. Recall important decisions in your own life. Were they accompanied by struggle and doubt? Who were the angels who supported you at that time? Give thanks for them.

2. Such periods of anxiety may seem like wilderness experiences at the time with nothing positive about them. Later, with hindsight, we may see it as a necessary testing that was for our good. Per-

haps, like Jesus, you recall a time when the Spirit of God led you into the wilderness to be tested and after the experience you had a clearer sense of your own identity or your purpose in life?

3. The arrest of John the Baptist was the occasion of the start of the public ministry of Jesus. When has some event outside of your control unexpectedly led you into some new and fruitful activity?

4. Convert and believe the good news was the heart of the message of Jesus. It was not a call to penance but to a change of heart, a change of attitude, leading to a change in behaviour. The kingdom of God is a kingdom of right relationships: with God, with one another, with creation, with ourselves. It is a change that leads to a fuller life. When have you found that a change in your attitude towards God, others, yourself, or the world around you, has led you to a more fulfilled or more fruitful life?

5. There is immediacy about the call of Jesus: “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near”. Recall when you had a realisation that now was the moment of opportunity – for a change in your life, for a spiritual renewal, or a time to give a wholehearted yes to life. At this moment to what do you believe you are invited to say yes?

PRAYER

God of the covenant, O God of mystery, as the forty days of deluge swept away the world’s corruption and watered new beginnings of righteousness and life, so in the saving flood of baptism your people are washed clean and born again.

Throughout these forty days, we beg you, unseal for us the wellspring of your grace, cleanse our hearts of all that is not holy, and cause your gift of new life to flourish once again.

Grant this through your Son, Jesus Christ, our liberator from sin, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Lent 1	Genesis 9:8-15	Noah	Ps 25 (24)	1 Pet 3:18-22	Mark 1:12-15
Lent 2	Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13, 14-18	Abraham	Ps (116) 115	Rom 8:31-34	Mark 9:2-10
Lent 3	Exodus 20:1-17	Moses	Ps (19) 18	1 Cor 1:22-25	John 2:13-25
Lent 4	2 Chron 36:14-16, 19-23	Exile	Ps 137 (136)	Eph 2:4-10	John 3:14-21
Lent 5	Jeremiah 31:31-34	New Covenant	Ps 51 (50)	Heb 5:7-9	John 12:20-33

He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit

1 Pet 3:18 For 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, 19 in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, 20 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. 21 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, 22 who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

It is not only the mention of Noah and the ark which makes this reading appropriate. The link with the early proclamation or kerygma and the mention of baptism both make this an excellent reflection for the start of Lent.

KIND OF WRITING

The overall letter has a straightforward structure, probably inspired by the Pauline model.

1:1-2	Greeting
1:3-12	Thanksgiving
1:13-5:11	Body of the letter
5:12-14	Conclusion

Our excerpt comes from a long section reflecting on suffering in the midst of hostility running from 3:13-5:11. Behind the teaching in 3:18-22 stands an early Christian hymn, which may have resembled this:

*Because Christ also suffered once for sins,
the just for the unjust,
to bring you to God,
by being put to death in the flesh
but by being made alive in the spirit.
In it he went and preached to the spirits in prison*

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Quite a good deal is known of the historical Simon Peter, from the Gospels, the Acts, the letters of Paul and extra-biblical sources such as 1 Clement and the letter of Ignatius to the Romans. In

general, however, it is thought that the documents bearing his name are not by the apostle himself but by a disciple, writing a generation or so later. The arguments in favour of this are: the excellent Greek, the reception of Pauline concepts and even language, the linking of the associates of the two apostles, images such as a Babylon for Rome—current only after 70 AD, similarities with 1 Clement (c. 95 AD), the reference to an “elder” as the author.

It looks like a circular letter to the churches of Asia Minor undergoing some kind of distress and marginalisation. Finally, it shows the tendency to bring together Petrine and Pauline traditions, probably in Rome. It is a real letter offer real encouragement to real people

RELATED PASSAGES

For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but threw them into hell and locked them up in chains in utter darkness, to be kept until the judgment, and if he did not spare the ancient world, but did protect Noah, a herald of righteousness, along with seven others, when God brought a flood on an ungodly world, and if he turned to ashes the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah when he condemned them to destruction, having appointed them to serve as an example to future generations of the ungodly, and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man in anguish over the debauched lifestyle of lawless men, (for while he lived among them day after day, that righteous man was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard) —if so, then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from their trials, and to reserve the unrighteous for punishment at the day of judgment, especially those who indulge their fleshly desires and who despise authority. (2Peter 2:4–10)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 18a The opening sentence reminds us that our ethics and behaviour are grounded *Christologically* in the destiny of Jesus. The “righteous for the unrighteous” is a citation from the Fourth Suffering Servant Song, Is 53:11-12. There is a robust dispute about the first verb in this sentence: should it read *died* (as in the JB and the Lectionary) or *suffered* (as here and in many versions)? The balance of probability is in favour of the

NRSV above. Christ’s suffering is meant to encourage Christians in their later and lesser suffering.

Verse 18b The contrast is not between the material and the spirit, to the detriment of the former, but rather a contrast between two worlds, present earthly existence and future transcendent vindication.

Verses 19-20a Who are “the spirits in prison”? There are two possibilities, bearing in mind that it is all somewhat obscure. It could mean the fallen angels, as in Gen 6:1-4, 1Cor 6:3; Jude 6; 2 Peter 2:4. It might also mean the generation at the time of Noah who did not repent and were awaiting judgment. See 2 Peter 2:4-10, above. The harrowing of hell or, better, the *anastasis* became a significant part of Christian iconography.

Verse 20b-21 The flood story is now read as an allegory of the washing of baptism. The few—only eight—is a reassurance to the Christian minority. Baptism is not automatic but works (a) through a good conscience, unlike those others of Noah’s day who did not hear the call to repentance and (b) through Jesus’ own resurrection. There is a possible allusion to baptism by immersion.

Verse 22 The enthronement of Christ is taken from Psalm 110, regularly used in the NT. The submission of the powers to him points perhaps to their final restoration and redemption.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The beginning of Lent is a really good time to reflect again upon my own baptism, what that means to me now and how I hope to live it more richly in the spiritual springtime of Lent.

2. Baptism cannot be separated from repentance, the foundational call in Jesus’ preaching. Metanoia is not merely a moral improvement but a total reorientation of outlook and values.

PRAYER

Saviour God and Abba, you came to the help of generations before us and we call upon you now to come to us again. Make us every more closely your sons and daughters that we may truly be your children, standing before you in good conscience, by the grace of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature

Gen 9:8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9 “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 10 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. 11 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.” 12 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: 13 I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, 15 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.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The primeval history of Genesis 1-11 illustrates human depravity and divine grace, in the great cycles of Eden, Cain and Abel, the Flood and the Tower of Babel. God’s forgiveness and grace continually outweigh the evil perpetrated by humans, so that the goodness of creation and the goodness of the creator are the prominent themes. The penultimate blessing of Noah and his descendants (9:1-7) echoes the blessing in Genesis 1.

Furthermore, later writers infiltrated into these foundational sagas a much later theology of covenant, thus making the ancient popular stories into bearers of the newest theology. All of this means that a cycle, such as that of the Flood, needs to be read (i) against the large Ancient Near Eastern background, (ii) within the book of Genesis and (iii) in the light of the later reception within the bible of the tale itself. There is also an interest in “explaining” natural phenomena, such as rainbows.

KIND OF WRITING

The biblical flood relies on two divergent traditions, which have been brought together to enrich the story.

Yahwist: 6:5-8; 7:1-5,7; 10, 12, 16b-20, 22-23; 8:2b-3:a, 6, 8-12, 13b, 20-22. The J source prefers the divine name “Yahweh”, a ready-made ark, a forty-day flood (with forty days embarking and disembarking), and an emotionally expressive deity. Two of each species with no distinction of clean and unclean.

Priestly: 7:8-9, 11, 13-16a, 21, 24; 8:1-2a, 3b-5, 7, 13a, 14-19; 9:1-17. The P source prefers the name “Elohim”, shows Noah commanded to build the ark to specific dimensions, depicts a 150-day flood (and 150-day ebbing), and a dispassionate, legally minded deity. Seven pairs of the clean and one pair each of the unclean.

The careful and successful stitching together of two tales makes for a rich theological reading of the human condition in relation to God.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Scholars regularly consider Genesis 1-11 to be distinct from the series of coherent family cycles which follow in the book of Genesis (Abraham, Jacob and Joseph). Within the primeval history, four narrative sequences all begin with a sin of some kind: Eden (Gen 2:4-3:4), the story of Cain and Abel (4:1-6), universal corruption (Gen 6:1-7) and the hubris of Babel (11:1-9). There is a final framing of hope, because God’s goodness and forgiveness are continually underscored, with the result that amid the desolation of the human condition, hope is possible.

RELATED PASSAGES

The flood: 1Chr 1:4; Ezek 14:14, 20; Is 24:1, 4, 5; 43:2; 54:8,9; Ps 18:16; 65:5-8; 69:1-2; 89:9; 93:3 (Hebrew Bible) Tobit 4:12; Sir 44:17 and Wis 10:14 (Greek OT). *Everlasting covenants:* Gen 9:16; 17:7, 13, 19. *The rainbow:* Sir 43:11-12; 50:6-7

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verses 8-9 According to the myth, this is every human being because eventually all are “descended” from these sole survivors. Covenant: cf. Gen 6:18.

Verse 10 A remarkable text: God restores good relationships with all of

creation.

Verse 11 Cf. Gen 8:21-22.

Verse 12 A repetition.

Verse 13 Technically, an etiological tale accounting for the phenomenon of light refracting through water. Didactically, it is a clever use of a beautiful natural event, which often marks the end of a period of rainfall (“flood”). There is a slight military air, because God hangs up the weapon (bow and rainbow are the same word in Hebrew), thereby ending the warfare.

Verse 14 Familiar to us all.

Verse 15 A full guarantee of God’s permanent protection. It is worth noting that the rainbow serves as a reminder to God! Cf. Ezek 1:29 and Rev 4:3.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. While faith is not only about consolation, the sense that “all will be well” is surely a core conviction of whoever believes in God. When have I needed this reassurance in my own life? When have I felt truly in the hands of God, “in whom we live and move and have our being”?

2. In these days of greater awareness of the essential connectedness of all things, it may help to notice that the covenant God makes is with all of creation, including ourselves. When have I become aware of being part of God’s great project? How do I live that responsibility?

3. The rainbow is beautiful and, no matter how often we see one, it still brings a sense of wonder and awe. Almost always, we stop to look, even briefly. For people with sight, colour is a huge part of the delight we have in creation, the sky, the land and the oceans. Is there some particular memory of a moment when sheer magnificence of created reality brought me into God’s presence?

PRAYER

God of steadfastness and hope, may we know in our lives your abiding reassurance that, no matter what happens, you are with us; may we hear you in the small still voice within and not be shaken by the storms of life. As we gaze upon the rainbow, may it remind us of your covenant with Noah and with us all— a guarantee that the forces of destruction will not prevail. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Genesis 9:8-15; Psalm 25 [24]; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:12-15

THEMES ACROSS THE READINGS

Actually, the Genesis story does not directly link with the Gospel, but indirectly through the second reading. 1 Peter 3:18-22 offers a typological reading of the flood, as a reference to the later “saving through water” which is baptism. Within that reading, the mention of a good conscience and of the preaching of Jesus makes a link with the Jesus’ own preaching of conversion in the Gospel.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The psalm takes up explicitly the theme of covenant and the need for God’s guidance as we make our way through life.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Genesis 9:8-15 Covenant with all of creation

Like ourselves, the ancients wondered about natural phenomena, like the rainbow, and what it could mean. It was a brilliant (!) move by the bible writers to use the rainbow to remind people of faith that “all will be well”, in the words of Julian of Norwich.

Second reading

1 Peter 3:18-22 The flood as “type” of Christian baptism

In the early church, Lent was a journey towards baptism. But what does it mean to be baptised? Using the biblical myth of the flood, this reading takes us back to what happened for us in Jesus’ death and resurrection, into which we have been baptised.

Gospel

Mark 1:12-15 Jesus’ proclamation

As we hear this reading for the second time this year, let ask ourselves again: what did Jesus mean by “good news” and does it make a difference to me?

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 18 February

Leviticus 19:1-2,11-18

The Old Testament has a very high moral vision—expressed quite concrete-

ly and practically in this reading. Even though the text is very old, the teaching still speaks today. The examples given illustrate how we may be compassionate and just or, in a word, holy, just as God himself is holy.

Matthew 25:31-46

Our Gospel is really more a *tableau* than a parable. Christ may be encountered in the vulnerable. When we ourselves are vulnerable, others may encounter Christ in us. Very simply: our choices have consequences.

Tuesday 19 February

Isaiah 55:10-11

The readings of Lent do indeed challenge, but they also encourage. Today we hear of God’s effective word, carrying out what it says. One way to listen might be to ask: has this been true for me in my life? Have I found the word of God an effective in my hearing and living? The link with the Gospel is most likely through the imagery of bread.

Matthew 6:7-15

We often tend to separate worship and life, thinking that when we’ve done our prayer, we’re done. A fundamental error! The prophets of old often pointed this out and Jesus does so again in the context of the Lord’s Prayer. Simps put, prayer from the heart, leads to forgiveness from the heart. The can be no separation.

Wednesday 21 February

St Peter Damian, bishop and doctor

Jonah 3:1-10

The ironic book of Jonah is serious about conversion as we see from the reaction not only of the humans, but even the beasts, herds and flocks! For our Lent purposes, the preaching of Jonah is taken at face value, inviting us today to a conversion of heart.

Luke 11:29-32

There is more to the Gospel than a reference back to Jonah. Are we such a generation, unmoved and complacent? However, the reference to Jonah is a kind of *a fortiori* argument: if people listen to Jonah, how much more should we listen to Jesus, Son of God!

Monday 22 February

The Chair of St Peter

1 Peter 5:1-4

Here we have simple and clear advice on Christian leadership which, for all its antiquity, is never out of date: *watch over the flock of God, not simply as a duty but gladly, because God wants it.* This applies not only to those in leadership, but to us all.

Matthew 16:13-19

This Gospel passage reflects the role of Peter in the church at Antioch — the exemplary *faith* of the apostle is our foundation stone and principle of unity. The heart of it all is Peter’s faith *in Christ.*

Friday 23 February

St Polycarp, bishop and martyr

Ezekiel 18:21-28

We *can* all change and repentance is a possibility always on the table. This is God’s desire for us — and our slightly threatening reading is finally positive.

Matthew 5:20-26

Following the best Jewish tradition, Jesus teaches that sin come from the heart, from within. It is our attitudes which count, in every sense. The risk of any formal worship is to think that when we’ve done that, we’re done. No way, as Jesus illustrates in the appended parable.

Saturday 25 February

Deuteronomy 26:16-19

Against the background of the covenant, Moses outlines our side of the bargain. Notice that we are to keep his commands with our heart—the offer is two-sided and conditional. The Gospel takes that a step deeper.

Matthew 5:43-48

Jesus demands of us a deeper and more costly love, taking us well beyond the conventional and even the natural. The argument is a good one: if people of no special religion manage to be at least decent, how much more is expected to all who have put their trust in God?