

Homily for 1st Sunday of Lent 2018

Sometimes we can miss the blindingly obvious. Christians are often accused of promoting the degradation of the environment by such texts as we find in Genesis interpreted as “subdue the earth”. Certainly, it has been used as a justification for exploiting the earth. But we overlook so much of the scripture. You can prove anything you like by taking a text from here or there from the Bible. Anything from antisemitism to not eating the blood of animals.

The reading from Genesis about Noah is a case in point. We so often just hear God destroying evil by a great flood and rescuing Noah. We don't hear so well the wonderful statement by God: “See, I establish my Covenant with you, and with your descendants after you; also with every living creature to be found with you, birds, cattle and every wild beast with you: everything that came out of the ark, everything that lives on the earth. I establish my Covenant with you: no thing of flesh shall be swept away again by the waters of the flood. There shall be no flood to destroy the earth again.” The rainbow remains the sign of that covenant. God's covenant is not just with Noah and human beings but all of creation in fact. Here there a great foundation for a spirituality for the care of the environment if we need one.

The Bible is a collection of books of all kinds. But we do call it one book. Because each text needs being heard in the context of the whole if it is to makes sense with all the contradictions and ambiguities found there. It is, after all, one particular people telling their story of how they struggled to believe the extraordinary goodness and generosity of God. God, of course would never destroy the earth by any great flood. That is not God's intention. God's intention is to give life not to destroy. The Jews came eventually to hear that revelation.

It is difficult to believe still. Our world is organised differently. Everything for us is a transaction a deal to be made. Every relationship seems to be about winning or losing. The many quiz shows and sports programs on TV illustrate how competitive we are. Then there is the question of who is dominating whom, who has power. From problems with domestic violence or international relationships we seem unable to think in any other way than that I must win over the other.

Fortunately for us, God's ways are not our ways. God's thoughts are not our thoughts. Jesus was tested in the wilderness for 40 days. St Mark does not detail the testing as St Matthew does. But it is the same. How will Jesus use his power? To dominate people or make people free? His life demonstrated that he chose the latter.

Jesus is not the least interested in winning at the expense of someone else. Gaining eternal life is not a competition between us and God. It is not a matter of winning God's approval. We don't have to win God's friendship. We already have it. God approves of all creation. God declared it very good. Once we realise this then doing the right thing, keeping the commandments and so on, is not the main problem. God does not love us because we are good, as it has been said. God loves us because God is good. That is why Jesus can say God alone is good. Jesus lets go of everything, bends over backwards as it were, to show us this astonishing revelation.

It is hard to avoid operating out of the current way our world is organised. That win or lose attitude infects everything. It affects the Church too. Our Lent is our yearly reminder of the change of mind, change of direction, the heart transplant, as the prophet Jeremiah put it, that we need. It is however a grace. If we think we can do it ourselves by dint of hard work we are surly doomed to failure. In the spiritual realm the ways of achievement is by letting go not hanging on to my plans, my effort, my work. It is about letting God in. Is not that why we continue doing the same old things and nothing changes. We need reminding that we are not the centre of the universe. We do not have the resources to grasp the mystery of ourselves or the world. Without God we have no centre but chase after all kinds of gods who do not satisfy. The very chase after one distraction after the other has become the god for many.

May our Lent be a time when we can slow down and welcome the Holy Spirit to renew us in body and spirit.

Fr Graham