

First Sunday of Lent

The mood of today's readings is set by the First Reading, which belongs to the Hebrew version of an ancient epic-poem. The hero is a person who saves the world from destruction. For the people of the ancient Near-East the sea was shrouded in mystery. It frequently took the lives of those foolhardy enough to venture out on it. It could not be ordered or subdued and continually threatened the land. It was an obvious symbol for chaos.

In the Hebrew version, God is the creator who fashions man and woman to be able to receive his love and live in communion with him. We are composed – so the poetry has it – of dust lovingly shaped by God. We are alive because God breathes his own breath into us. The worst threat to human existence comes from our rejection of God's Spirit, God's life-giving breath. To persist in this obstinate rejection must cause us to collapse back into the dust from which we were formed.

God, of course, continues to offer his love, but, because God is love, he will not force it upon us. We will all be destroyed unless there is someone willing to receive God's love. This is where Noah comes in. He stands for everyman and everywoman who is willing to stand against the folly of the world and open their hearts in obedient love. The ark in the story of Noah is not a boat, it is a temple, rising above the flood. All life dwells in it and from it light issues forth to dissipate the gloom. The story of Noah is the story of every saint. It is a dramatic presentation of what each one of us can do if we are faithful to God's Spirit and if we live our lives in love.

Noah is but a poetic symbol of what is realised perfectly in Jesus. Being truly human Jesus had to share in our human condition, with its trials, difficulties and temptations. This is the point of the Gospel. Unlike us, Jesus did not sin. He humbly followed the way in which God's Spirit led him. From the temple of his body, the light of God's love continued to shine out, calling others to follow him. He showed us how to be saved from the chaotic waters that threaten to engulf us, and he gave us his Spirit to unite us to him and make it possible for us to walk with him in love.

The Second Reading reminds us that we, too, have been saved from the waters, like Noah and Moses. In baptism we were lifted by God out of the baptismal waters and given to the embrace of Jesus.

What is the chaos from which Jesus is saving us? There are chaotic forces threatening us from outside. There are chaotic forces threatening us from within. Grace strengthens us against the hurt that others inflict upon us. It strengthens us to resist peer pressure. It gives us a safe place where we can experience love and so be strengthened against the temptation to go and grab love for ourselves, whatever the consequences for ourselves or for others. We are saved most of all from many forces from within that are even more dangerous. In our confusion and restlessness and insecurity, we can be compelled from within to self-destructive behaviour. God's holds us within the ark of his embrace.

At baptism we were given a candle to remind us that the light of Christ is given to us to light up our way. We were anointed with the perfumed chrism to remind us that the perfume of Christ's Spirit is given to us to fill up our senses with God. We know that we have a garden in the deepest recesses of our souls, watered by a spring welling up from

the very heart of God. God is dwelling there and inviting us to dwell there too in a peace and tranquillity which the world cannot give and which nothing can take from us.

The following is a prayer that was on the lips of the dying Yogananda. We could well make it our own as we invite Christ to enter our bodies, which he has chosen as his temple, his ark: 'In your temple, by your own hand, light the lamp of your love. Turn my darkness into light. Turn my darkness into light.'

This brings us to the Responsorial Psalm, and the special invitation given us by God through the Church at the beginning of Lent. The Psalmist longs to do the will of God, as did Noah in the ancient epic, and as did Jesus himself who lived from every word that comes from the mouth of God. The Psalmist trusts in God's love and so trusts that the way marked out by God is the wisest way to live, the way that will best lead to life. He makes three points all of which are relevant to us today.

The first point is that this way is indicated through tradition. We do not have to discover it all on our own. God has been saving people for a long time. The saints have a lot to teach us. We would be very foolish to think we could break with them and from the community of the Church that nurtured them. We are not alone, and the example of their beautiful lives and the wisdom that they have left us is one powerful way in which God reveals to us his will.

The second point is that if we sin, and so lose the way, God will always be there calling us back and breathing the breath of his Spirit into us to guide us along the right way. This is the Good News of which Jesus speaks in the Gospel as he calls his contemporaries to take stock of where they are, and to open their minds and hearts to the Good News. Lent is a very special time for us to do this.

The third point is that to be open to God's saving grace we need to be humble and to recognise our need for grace. We call this virtue faith. We are invited as we begin our Lent, to name the kind of chaos that threatens to engulf us, and to pray earnestly for the faith needed to respond to God's invitation to enter the ark, that is to say the inner temple of our bodies, there to live in growing communion with God.

Drawing on the rich tradition of his Jewish faith, Jesus himself speaks of three aspects of the repentance that are central to our Lenten observance. He speaks of fasting, for we need to check our tendency to self-indulgence, and make space to experience our deeper hunger, which is for communion with God in love. He speaks of almsgiving, for we need to check our tendency to restrict our caring to ourselves and to those who are part of our lives, and neglect the needs of our neighbours. He speaks of prayer, for we need to check our tendency to live on the surface and neglect the deepest yearnings of our souls.

I will conclude these reflections on this point, for it is grace that we need and the faith that opens us to welcome the gift of God's love. In the final stages of dying from cancer, perhaps our greatest Australian lyric poet, James McAuley was able to say:

I know that faith is like a root that's tough, inert and old;
Yet it can send up its green shoot and flower against the cold.
I know there is a grace that flows when all the springs run dry.
It wells up to renew the rose and lift the cedars high.