

18/2/18 Lent 1
Joint Parish Service at St Francis

Genesis 9:8-17

Psalm 25:1-9

1 Peter 3:18-end

Mark 1:9-15

Today we are marking the first Sunday of Lent – the colours on the alter and the service books have changed temporarily; if you have decided to fast from anything I hope that the cravings are not too bad yet! I will also ask those of you who were at either of the Ash Wednesday services how your hearts are doing this morning.

The focus of the sermons on Ash Wednesday was the heart – your heart, my heart and the condition that they are in at this present time. I don't mean the physical condition of your heart either! By all means – take care of them but it is not your diet and exercise that I am asking after.

The focus on the heart has come about after attended a conference a few weeks ago with Shola. The keynote speaker made the comment about Ash Wednesday, and Lent more widely as being a point of reflection, a time to step aside and ask ourselves 'what have I picked up here in my heart?'

This question has stuck with me as I began to think about the condition of my own heart. As I have been praying, I felt that this is the question to ask through Lent not only of myself but also to others to ask themselves.

The entire season of Lent could be a time set aside for examination (if we never have) or the re-examination (if we already do regularly) of our hearts. Our hearts need to be guarded for they are the well-spring of life, everything you do flows from it (Proverbs 4:23).

Given the readings this morning - they kind of have a Sunday School feel to them, don't they? The story of God and Noah and the rainbow set alongside the story of Jesus' baptism. I feel like I should give you some colouring sheets or something!

However, there is the grown-up side to them as well. A Children's Bible doesn't mention Jesus being driven into the wilderness with the wild beasts to be

tempted by Satan or John's arrest. It also misses out on the end of the Noah story. Go read your Bible...

Along with having an adult side, the Genesis and Mark readings are hugely significant in understanding the nature of God's heart towards his creation (including us and all the animals) and towards Jesus.

To understand the heart of another person is no small feat! It is hard work; it takes love, patience, endurance, courage and time! The same is true with getting to know and understand the heart of God.

God does have a heart! I am not sure if this is news to you or not. If our view of God is that he is distant, cold and uncaring then we may not think that he has a heart. But he does; he must - because we humans have hearts - and if we are made in His image then he has a heart as well.

God's heart, much like ours, is a heart that breaks. The great flood in Genesis is a result of God's broken heart. What broke God's heart? His people, those whom he had created. Us.

Genesis 6:6 – *And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.* Anyone else here besides me know what it is to be grieved to the heart over something?

The flood was catastrophic – no doubt about it, everything was wiped out. We mere humans do not have that kind of power to react out of grief. But God does. We can of course still be destructive!

After the flood, creation is made new – there is a re-creation. The first creation has gone and the new one begins with Noah – new people and animals appear; the seasons are re-established, and humanity is blessed by God. However, it is still marred with human sinfulness.

God makes a covenant that begins with Noah and his family but also for every person and creature until the end of time. A covenant – OT word that comes up a lot. It is a sacred promise, an agreement. The covenant that God makes with Noah and all of creation is that never again will a flood destroy the earth. This covenant between God and Noah is the first one that God ever made with humankind.

God also gave us a sign of the Covenant – the rainbow. This is significant as it proves God's compassion for his people, His promises to his people and the

obligations the covenant puts on them. What are the obligations – don't grieve God! Like the song says, 'don't go breaking my heart!'

A rainbow signifies that we need two things for life – sunlight and water. When they come together, a rainbow is visible. To see rainbows, we have to keep our heads up – we don't see rainbows if we walk around with our eyes on the ground.

We also see the promise and heart of God in the waters of baptism. The waters of baptism symbolize both the judgment resulting from sin and the cleansing and forgiveness which result only from the death and resurrection of Jesus.

It is fascinating to me that Jesus was baptised. He is the only person in all human history who did not need to be! Jesus did not need to go down in water to have his sin washed away because he had no sin. The only sin that Jesus knows is ours. In the waters of baptism, we are cleansed from our sins and are connected to the heart of God through Jesus. We are welcomed into his family.

Mark begins his Gospel with the baptism of Jesus and is scant on the details compared to Matthew and Luke who provide much more information. Mark wants us to get on with discovering who Jesus is and why he is so important.

When we see who Jesus really is, we can begin to understand who He's made us to be and who we are in Him. Many people go through their whole life and never really understand who they are or what they were made to do.

People who are not clear on their own identity are often very (if not overly) concerned with what other people think; this is not unimportant, but it isn't the final word either. Many people look for identity outside themselves – in their spouse, children, job, house, car or bank account. I think this is true of both older and younger people.

How can we come to understand who we are? I think this story can help...

My Mom had an elderly Great Aunt named Betty. Great Aunt Betty was a character – she lived to be a 103 and was very committed to her family and liked them to visit her. So much so that Aunt Betty would point out when her nieces and nephews didn't visit!

Shortly after her 100th birthday, my Mom received the command/invitation to visit. My Mom recalls that on the 2-ish hour drive to Aunt Betty's seniors'

accommodation she thought about all the other things that she should be doing that day.

As she was walking down the corridor, one of Aunt Betty's neighbours opened her door to see who was coming. Aunt Betty who was waiting at her door for my Mom, said to her neighbour, 'This is Eddie's girl Margie.' Eddie being her father.

My Mom recalls that in that moment her heart melted and all the things she should have been doing that day floated away. No one had called her Eddie's girl for decades! She was Mrs. Lepp, Wally's wife and Sue & Jenn's Mom etc. But not Eddie's girl.

Mom said they had a wonderful visit and she stayed far longer than she had planned as she relished in being Eddie's girl.

This is what God says to Jesus when he comes up out of the water – 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' You are my girl, my guy!

Through Jesus we are given the right to be the children of God. We all have access to the God the Father. God is well pleased with You. He loves you. You are on his heart.

Say to the person next you to you – You are God's son/daughter. He is well-pleased with you.

Most people and many Christians don't know this or live like this is true. If love and affection aren't shown in human families, it can be very difficult to a) view God as Father and b) expect anything from him.

This is one of our primary jobs as Priests – to make sure you know that God loves you. That you are on his heart – all the time.

Why do we need to know this, live like this? Two reasons really.

Firstly – like Jesus, there are times we will find ourselves in the wilderness. A wilderness experience biblically was a time of testing and ultimately deliverance.

Jesus is not treated as we might expect post-baptism – if you have been to a baptism recently you may have experienced a lavish celebration after the event! There is no time here to linger in the glory of baptism. Mark writes as though Jesus went from the banks of the Jordan to the wilderness immediately.

However, Jesus' time in the wilderness is not to be seen as unfortunate circumstance or a lapse or failure on the part of Jesus. This time was divinely orchestrated as much as his baptism was. The time of temptation was to establish that Jesus had choices and desires of his own – like all human's – and must choose to make God's will his own will.

This is true for us to – we will choose God's way or our own way. Notice that God does not abandon Jesus in the wilderness – Jesus is ministered to by the angels. When we find ourselves in the wilderness – we are not abandoned as it is Jesus who tends to us.

Lent can be a wilderness season of sorts as we make time (or should make time) to examine where we are at with God – hence my opening question of 'what have you picked up here in your heart?'

A wilderness season however challenging will never be wasted if we believe and know that God with us, that our identity lies in being His beloved son or daughter. If we can hang on to that, then whatever the wilderness throws at us can be overcome.

Secondly – one day our hearts will stop beating and this life will be over. What happens then? I know from many years of nursing and a few years of ministry this is a big question for many people – one that often wants to be avoided.

Both Lent and Baptism prepare us for death. In Lent we journey to the cross with Jesus to his death. In Baptism we are cleansed in the waters and given the forgiveness that Jesus gave his life for so that we can have life after we die.

What can we do about this? Most of you – I am guessing were baptised as babies. Your parents brought you to church and presented you. This morning, at the start of this Lenten season we will renew our baptismal vows. I am not re-baptising you or baptising you if you haven't been.

Renewing vows is a way of renewing the promises that were made when we were first baptised. I hope that it reminds you that you are a beloved and precious child of God.