

<b>Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2015</b> <b>Cathedral, Grahamstown</b> <b>7.30 &amp; 9.30 a.m.</b>		<b>1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent – Year B</b>
Gen 9:8-17	Ps 25:1-10	1 Peter 3:18-22
		Mark 1:9-15
<b>WILDERNESS AND HOPE</b>		

The news headlines this week have been, by and large, dreadful. There has been a lot said on the State of the Nation Address<sup>1</sup>; a fair amount of family violence<sup>2</sup>, some horrific rape cases; there are daily reports of ongoing Boko Haram and ISIS attacks<sup>3</sup>; and then the shooting in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA, of three young Muslims – one of them a school friend of our own Paul Daniels.

### **When things go wrong**

When things go wrong around us, when we see the effects of extreme anger, or violence, or cruelty; or when people behave or speak in such a way that seems to come from a deep well of hatred and resentment and unhappiness inside of them, it is easy to point fingers. We would never go down that road – or so we think. But what about our own rage and anger? Our jealousy or hatred? Our own passions? What drives us? What stirs within us?

The readings for today focus (in our reading from Genesis) on the Covenant between God and Noah, and (in our Gospel reading) on the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness: on the one hand, the relationship that saves us, the love of God that holds us and embraces us; on the other hand, the temptations, the wild beasts of evil and destruction, that surround us.

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1 Zuma broke Parliament – Maimane. “Malema sneaks in another ‘pay back the money’.” “Baleka must withdraw cockroach comments – EFF”.

2 “Man appears for using baby to beat girlfriend.” “Victim’s mom denies knowledge of alleged Hewitt rape.” “Woman allegedly kills ‘cheating’ boyfriend.”

3 “Boko Haram blamed for Cameroon military base attack.” “ISIS beheads 21 Coptic Christians.”

Our scripture readings help us to grapple with the reality that we live in a deeply flawed, hurting and broken world; that as much as it is a world created by God, it is also a world that is far from perfect. As much as we think it should not be like this, this is a world where we are tested and tempted, where we face wild beasts of evil and violence and abuse of power. We have to take our share in the struggles against these wild beasts. But – and this is important – our Bible readings also remind us that God reaches out to us with the good news of his love and the coming of his kingdom.

## **Lent & the wilderness**

We are in the season of Lent, the 40 days, excluding Sundays, from Ash Wednesday until Easter Day. After Jesus had been baptised, “the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness, and there he remained for forty days tempted by Satan.” (Mk 1:12f.). Lent is our wilderness time, as we imitate Jesus: this is our time to face up to temptations, to the different voices that we hear, and to recognise the choices that we make.

Our gospel reading begins with the account of Jesus’ baptism. His baptism was a moment of great blessing and renewal – the heavens broke open, the Spirit descended on Jesus, the voice of God spoke to him, “You are my beloved Son; in you I take delight” (Mk 1:10-11).

This experience of great blessing, this moment of purity and holiness, a deep awareness of the presence of God with Jesus, is followed immediately by a profound time of testing. He goes out into the wilderness, where he spends forty days, among the wild beasts.

There is great significance in this wilderness experience, this experience of testing that Jesus went through.

The gospel tells us that it was “the Spirit” who “drove Jesus out into the wilderness”. It was a deliberate move of the Spirit.

It says that a time of testing, a wilderness experience, is as much a gift of God as a time of blessing and renewal.

A wilderness is a tough, bleak place. No water, no food, no shelter, no road. Without help, we are lost and we die.

Many cultures and traditions have an extended time of testing and retreat, a wilderness experience, as part of the transition from childhood to adulthood – e.g. our young men who emerge from the bush after their period of circumcision and initiation into manhood.

The wilderness experience is key to the history of the people of Israel. As they fled from their life of slavery in Egypt, on their journey to the Promised Land, they learned to trust in God. They learned to look to God for food and water, for guidance, for their daily needs. They were shaped into the people of God.

It is in the wilderness that Jesus was surrounded by wild beasts – symbols of danger and fear. It was truly a terrible situation. It was a time for him to be close to God. Indeed, in the wilderness, amongst the wild beasts, “angels attended to his needs.” (Mk 1:13). He was not utterly alone. God sent angels to help him.

Our lives can at times represent a wilderness: we may be lonely, desolate, filled with despair, hopeless, frightened – surrounded by the wild beasts of evil, danger, the experience of hardship, heartbreak. And it is in the wilderness that we have to draw on all the resources available to us, so as to survive; we are given the opportunity to look to God for our every need; we have to find the courage to stand against the wild beasts; and we discover the angels, the people around us who unexpectedly help us and encourage us. We are given glimmers of hope and light.

Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days – also significant. In the Bible, the number forty represents a turning point: the end of the old, the start of something new, a new work of God.

So we observe the forty day season of Lent, as a moment in our lives when God is doing something new, a turning point, a time of transformation, a time to wait on God for the way forward.

## **Jesus is tempted**

During his time in the desert, Jesus was tempted by the devil. Our Gospel reading for today is from Mark, which gives very little detail; the other two synoptic gospels of Matthew and Luke describe three temptations. They are the three big temptations that we all face in different ways.

There is the temptation of money – material wealth, possessions – seen in the growing inequality in SA; pay rises for city councillors, when the municipality is dysfunctional; and the US \$1 million birthday bash for Robert Mugabe.

There is the temptation of sex, the temptation that comes our way through our physical needs and desires, which plays itself out through alcohol, or drugs, or sex, or food – seen in the ongoing crisis of violence against women and children, with rape and domestic violence as a tragic and immensely painful reality in our community – not helped by the release, this past weekend, of the film *Fifty Shades of Grey*, with the way it glamorises sexual violence and domestic abuse, and gives men and women the false message that men are entitled to violent sexual behaviour – and that women must simply accept this.

There is the temptation of power, the temptation to control and dominate, to dictate and to crush, to oppress and to bully, to force and to overwhelm, to silence others – seen in Parliament, last week, at the State of the Nation Address. We deplore the tactics of the EFF, as well as the state use of the police in ejecting unruly members of parliament,

and the silencing of the media – but at the same time the message from many of us to the President, is – pay back the money. As a country we are facing a crisis, the crisis of the misuse of power.

## **CONCLUSION**

The story does not end in the wilderness, facing the wild beasts. Jesus emerged from his time of testing, stronger, resolute, clear in his purpose and calling, able to withstand the attacks of the evil one, able to withstand temptation. We shall emerge from our wilderness of Lent into the Easter reality: the reality that the kingdom of God is amongst us, that God does indeed hold us in his light and love, that the God who established the covenant relationship with Noah, and Abraham, is the God who reaches out to us and draws us into a relationship of trust and belonging and love.

We bring to God in prayer all who are in the wilderness at this time, who are going through a time of testing and struggle: those who have lost their jobs; those who are in prison; those who are victims of violence and cruelty; those who have just learned that they are terminally ill; those who are feeling alone and isolated; those who are being bullied or abused; those who have recently been bereaved.

Let's pray for our Annual Vestry Meeting, which comes up on a few weeks time; for the election of churchwardens and parish councillors for the year ahead; for our discussions at Vestry. We want God's will to be done in the life of the Cathedral.

And in our own wilderness, may we know the Lord's presence as we face the wild beasts. Let's have eyes to see the angels that are with us.