

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Mark
Glory to you, O Lord.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.

And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

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

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying,

'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

In this and coming Sundays, our readings will guide us through the covenants and promises which God made with his people, and to Noah, Abraham and Moses. Old promises which remain to this day.

Now, I must admit that I used to think of Noah and his ark as a nice story to tell children. All the animals going in, two by two, trying to get out of the rain, and of the Manx cat running so late he lost his tail in the door as it shut.

But that's only part of the story. Think again - Noah's story also tells of how most of the earth was destroyed, the deaths of millions of animals and people. If you've ever had to mop up after floodwaters, you'll know what a devastating experience it is. Suddenly, Noah's flood isn't a bedtime story, but a story that is very real in our own days of climate change and the extinction of swathes of species.

As we heard today, the story ends when God sets his bow in the clouds - an ancient, Mesopotamian way of describing a rainbow, shining out and dividing the light from the dark as the earth dried out.

And the most important thing is that we hear the very first covenant, the very first promise between humanity and God - that there will never again be such destruction, there will never again be such overwhelming disaster on the face of the earth. That is a covenant, a promise that our prayers hold God to in our own time - that even when we have critically damaged our only earth - that God will not allow its utter desolation.

Next week, we will hear the promise which God made to Abram and Sarai - the promise that their descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand upon the seashore, in commitment to their faith and belief in one God, the almighty.

That covenant is what holds Jews, Christians and Muslims together, as people who hold Abraham and Sarah as their common ancestors. Today, when radio telescopes tell us of the

presence of millions and billions of stars beyond our earthly sight - we see this covenant was not an idle boast.

What does such a promise mean to us today? For me, after a year when my faith has been tested by the dark, deep questions which the pandemic has raised, this covenant is the assurance that God still wants humanity to be part of his great family, that we still have a part to play in handing on that faith in one, almighty God to the next generation.

And the week after, we come to the covenant which God makes with the Israelites on Mount Sinai, as Moses climbs up into the clouds to receive the Ten Commandments. It is the great turning point when God's people turn from being slaves in Egypt, to being a free people in their own right, with an inheritance and the assurance of God's protection and guidance.

Again, after this last year, I find comfort in this covenant, that God is promising to protect the weak, fragile gathering of people - to break open their prison houses and walk with them to a promised land.

Normally in Lent, these readings come as a reminder of how many times, we as individuals and humanity have fallen short and forgotten those promises, failed to keep our side of the bargain.

But after this year, hearing these promises comes as our assurance that God is in this for the long haul, and will not give up on us. God promises freedom, God promises walk with us, part of that great family, God promises not to completely destroy.

And then Lent brings us to the greatest covenant, the greatest promise of all, made when Jesus died on the cross and rose to new life three days later. God's promise that death is not the final end, but that we go on to eternal life in the kingdom of heaven.

That was not an easy promise to bring to birth - and today's Gospel shows the Father promising to his Son that there will be trials and hardships ahead, but there is the certain hope that the Father's love will endure throughout it all, and will bring that kingdom near.

These four promises, these covenants are for us, today. They are just as much made to us, as they were to Noah, Abraham and Moses - which makes them powerful, and special, able to give us hope and faith whatever we may face.

For all that our Lenten journey calls us to be honest and make amends for the times we have not lived as people who know such promises; we're also invited, by listening afresh to the covenants which God has made - to live a life of hope, freedom, faith and care which God gives us.

In our care for creation, in our care for one another and those in need, in our calls for justice and our joining with God as the kingdom is built - may we too live out and share those promises with those who long to hear their good news. Amen.