

Lent I Year B 2018

I'm longing to see the latest film by the Mexican director Guillermo del Toro. *The Shape of Water* has garnered many accolades since it started screening, winning the Venice Film Festival and receiving 13 Oscar nominations. It follows on from *Pan's Labyrinth*, his film set during the Spanish Civil War. That was an extraordinary fantasy; enchanting, terrifying and heart-breaking in equal measure. *The Shape of Water* tells the story of a profoundly deaf woman who becomes involved in a Cold War plot involving a humanoid amphibian. I can't wait! How are you with water? Are you a great swimmer? Perhaps you don't swim at all or suffer from hydrophobia. If so, I fear today's readings might bear uncomfortable imagery, each in their way involving a background of watery moments.

Our first reading follows the immediate aftermath of the Great Flood described in Genesis – in fact an account of faithfulness seen in the face of a righteous man – Noah, and we hear the first mention in the Bible of a covenant between God and humanity – a chord of love which, although unbroken on God's part is hopelessly dealt with by humanity. We see its renewal through Abraham, Moses and David amongst others during Israelite history before the coming of Jesus.

The First Letter of Peter also mentions Noah and the flood but links this account to the Sacrament of Baptism – and a reminder that through the waters of Baptism, we are drawn to new life through the Holy Spirit. This gift is bestowed on us no matter our age, be we a few weeks old or 100 years old. We become part of the body of Christ – indeed, are bound up in the life of Jesus Christ through the power of Holy Spirit. Baptism is an overflowing of God's desire to draw us into further knowledge of his Love. Whether or not we grow in Faith entirely depends on us or, if we are young, on our parents and godparents. If you have attended a baptism here at Holy Trinity, you will know that I always stress their promises to enable the baptised child to know Jesus and be drawn into the worshipping life of the Church - so quite a responsibility.

Our Gospel reading today takes us almost to the start of Mark's Good News, and in his quickfire way he draws us into the action in a dramatic way. We hear in the space of six verses, three scenarios to consider just how Jesus reveals and responds to his Divine nature and call. First the baptism in the River Jordan. If you were here last week, you will know that I described three different 'pillars' on which Mark seems to frame his telling of the Good News. In each Jesus humbles himself before confirmation of his divine Sonship is heard – in this and the Transfiguration account by the voice of God, and in the final one on the lips of the centurion when Jesus dies - 'Truly this man was God's Son.'

Today Jesus humbles himself as he comes to John to be baptised. Mark uses drama to draw us in. Jesus *'saw the heavens torn apart and the Holy Spirit descending like a dove upon him,'* and the divine voice, *'You are my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'* This image of the dove is, of course, founded on the creation story where the Spirit of God *'hovered over the face of the deep.'* Another watery image, and of course why Christian imagery depicts the Holy Spirit as a dove – although I think we can safely enlarge our understanding of the Holy Trinity as far more than merely (in the words of a woman priest I know of), as that of two blokes with a bird!

Mark also wants us to link in our minds that in his Gospel, just as the heavens are torn apart at the moment of baptism, so too at the moment of Jesus' death the curtain in front of the Holy of Holies in the Temple is torn in two – a new and everlasting Covenant is brought about through the giving of the Son for the life of humanity and of creation itself – an understanding that we and the whole of creation travels ultimately towards Divine unity. It is wrought through crown of thorns, nails and spear, death and resurrection.

Jesus is then driven immediately by the Spirit into the wilderness and unlike Matthew or Luke, this desert experience when Jesus is tempted is dealt with in just a few words. The great news is that, yes, Jesus experienced temptation just like you and I do. Looking at this moment at the start of his ministry, it is likely that he had to wrestle in his mind what form his Messiahship would take. Ultimately, he brings about transformation for the world, not through acts of power or riotous opposition to the authority of either Temple or Rome but through giving his life for each of us. Mark's imagery of wild beasts and angels should reassure us that when we ourselves are tempted, God's presence is always there to call upon to aid us.

On this first Sunday of Lent, the third part of our Gospel reading is a call from Jesus to each one of us – *The Time has come - The Kingdom of God is near - Repent – Believe in the Good News.*

This message reveals the full purpose of Jesus' ministry to humanity:

- **The Time has come:** A call about here and now, not something to deal with tomorrow. Jesus calls you now!
- **The Kingdom of God is near:** The Kingdom is not a place or even heaven, but the loving grace of God seen in the face of Jesus Christ and working within us to bring about our transformation; to know the overflowing grace of God revealed though journeying with Jesus – a grace started with our baptismal journey. We are called to be signs of the Kingdom.
- **Repent:** This is not some airy-fairy concept dreamt up by the Church to create a self-loathing within. This is the call from Jesus to a lifelong journey of transformation - liberation from the destructive forces within our own lives. Jesus is not asking us to do or not to do something to shape our future in Heaven; he is concerned with the here and now. We are constantly called to turn to God through the example of Jesus – to approach the world through self-giving Love.
- **Believe in the Gospel:** We are called to know that the Gospel – the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God – as Mark proclaims in verse one of his Gospel – is indeed transformation for Christians started through the waters of Baptism, together with the call to share with others the Good News of true life to be found through Jesus Christ.

My friends, here is the Lenten call to us all: **now** is the time to deepen our knowledge of the love God bears for each of us through his Son; **now** is the time to allow ourselves the time to journey with him; **now** the time to know that through our transformation in the knowledge of the Good News he imparts that we also help to transform the world. As we are fed at the table of the Lord, may our **faith** be nourished, our **hope** increased, and our **love** strengthened.

Genesis 9: 8-17

⁸ Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹ ‘As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰ and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.^[a] ¹¹ I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.’ ¹² God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³ I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶ When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.’ ¹⁷ God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.’

I Peter 3:18-22

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹ in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. ²¹ And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

Mark 1:9-15

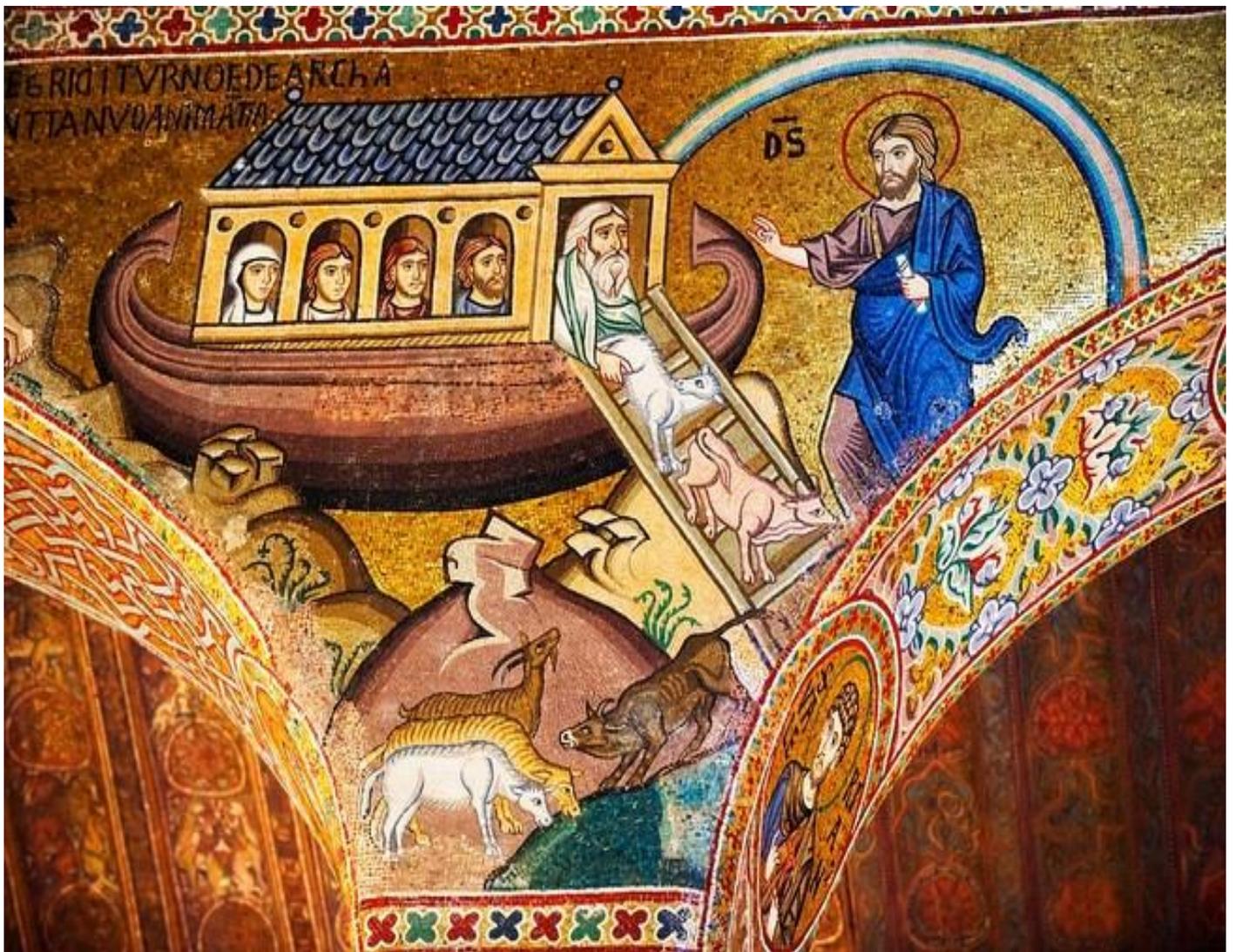
⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ ¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. ¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’

Collect

Almighty God,
whose Son Jesus Christ fasted forty days in the wilderness,
and was tempted as we are, yet without sin:
give us grace to discipline ourselves in obedience to your Spirit;
and, as you know our weakness,
so may we know your power to save;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Post Communion

Lord God,
you have renewed us with the living bread from heaven;
by it you nourish our faith, increase our hope, and strengthen our love:
teach us always to hunger for him who is the true and living bread,
and enable us to live by every word that proceeds from out of your mouth;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.



Monreale Cathedral, Sicily