

Lent 1 Year B 2012

The animals went in two by two, hurrah, hurrah

The animals went in two by two, hurrah, hurrah

The animals went in two by two

The elephant and the kangaroo

And they all went into the ark for to get out of the rain.

Do you remember singing that at Sunday School? And then it became just another thing we forgot until the next generation came along, or we started teaching Sunday School. But the Jewish people never forgot. The story of Noah and the Ark became part of their foundation myth, part of who they were. They knew why Noah had built the ark - God had told him to, because 'I will blot out from the earth the human beings that I have created . . . for I am sorry that I have made them (Gen 6.7)', and 'the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened'. Because of all the wickedness he saw on earth, God un-creates the world which he had called into being by speaking his word across the chaotic waters, and sends back the waters of chaos. The first creation had been 'very good' but disobedience, violence and lawlessness had corrupted it - God needed to end it all, or start again. God

saves a remnant, Noah and his family and the animals he has taken into the ark - time for Plan B!

God's unstoppable desire to create a peaceful, harmonious cosmos, and to destroy what has gone wrong, collides with His unbounded compassion for destructive, unrepentant humanity. So Plan B - which is sealed with a covenant. Unlike the covenants which will come later (Abraham/Isaac/Jacob, Moses and the people of the Exodus, David, etc.) where promises are made on both sides, this is a one-sided covenant - God does all the promising; nothing whatever is required of Noah and his descendants for ever, or of the rest of creation. God promises that, whatever happens (inclination to evil, the powerful exploiting the powerless, corruption, greed, violence, destruction of nature) - whatever happens - 'never . . . never . . . never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth'. And to make sure that He doesn't forget His promise, God puts his war-bow in the sky, unstrung and pointing away from the earth. The rainbow is not there to remind us of God's promise (although it does); it is there to remind God! 'Never again'. God will remain loyal to the disloyal, will accept hurt to keep hope alive. Plan B! The unchanging God changes His plan because He refuses to give up

on creation - the refusal to give up is what makes Him unchanging. He keeps the future open. Although in this covenant story we find a God full of pain and regret we find no anger, just sorrow, love and determination. Creation is granted a reprieve. And during Lent we are granted a reprieve, another chance, an opportunity to acknowledge how far short of God's intentions we have fallen, individually and collectively. Will we grab that chance or continue with that violence, greed, destruction?

The drama of that choosing is played out in today's Gospel reading. When Jesus rises from the waters of baptism, full of the knowledge of God's favour, he is driven into the wilderness, a place inhabited by Satan, wild beasts and angels. 'He was with the wild beasts', Mark writes. That is very ambiguous. Is that the wild beasts used by the Romans to tear people apart in the circus (something Mark's readers would have been well aware of), or is that the wild beasts are once more in harmony with mankind in God's new creation, begun in Jesus? Or is it that Mark is telling his readers that even if they have to face the wild beasts in the circus, Jesus will be with them? Mark doesn't explain. How can six words carry such meaning? Mark simply tells us that Jesus leaves the wilderness and goes to Galilee. Whatever happened to

him in the wilderness, he leaves confident of who he is and what he has to do - proclaim the good news of God's kingdom, which has come near, together with a call to repentance.

The call to repentance clearly continues on from the preaching of John the Baptist - but do Jesus and John mean the same thing when they say 'repent'? When John calls for repentance the people ask what they should do - it is about individual actions. Jesus seems to be calling Israel to repentance, to 'turn back', to turn from idolatry to YHWH, to return from its thrall to Satan and come back to the Father, to acknowledge God as king rather than Caesar (not that the peasants of Galilee had any control over the socio-political activities of the religious authorities, so perhaps Jesus is already drawing the battle lines). The repentance of Jesus and John are not, of course, mutually exclusive. So we too are called to repent and believe the good news, but what do we mean by 'good news'? To those listening to Jesus (and for Mark's first readers) good news would have meant (with roots in the prophecy of Isaiah) the long awaited triumph of YHWH over the forces of evil - so the restoration of creation as God had originally intended it to be, and the rescue and restoration of Israel. The triumph of Jesus over Satan in the

wilderness was, therefore, 'good news' and the people would see that and see the rescue of God's people in all that Jesus said and did - exorcisms, healings, restorations, opposition to oppression - Jesus is the good news. It is in Jesus that we need to believe. But what do we mean by 'the kingdom of God'? It is clearly not a place (like the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland). It has no geographical limits, and yet, if it has 'come near' it must have some form that we can recognise. What does it look like, feel like, even sound like? Are there things about the kingdom that we can taste or smell? Is it like the smell of incense at Evening Prayer, or the smell of bread coming out of my oven on Saturday mornings, or more like the smell of the homeless person sitting on the Cathedral steps when I stop to have a word? Does the kingdom sound like a Taize' chant, like clapping for the NHS, like the banging of pans in opposition to a military take-over or the sound of ventilators in an ICU? I seem to have asked an awful lot of questions this week, and offered few answers - but perhaps that is what I am supposed to do. After all, I'm not here to tell you what to think but to encourage you to think, to ask your own questions, find your own answers, or even admit that you don't have answers. Lent is a

good time to walk the path of questioning, walk through your own wilderness with your own wild animals - and angels - with Jesus by your side - and overhead a glorious rainbow and that promise - 'never, never again'.