



# *First Sunday in Lent*

## *Sermon by Revd Margaret Place*



Sunday 21 February 2021

### READINGS

Genesis 9: 8-17; Psalm 25: 1-10; 1 Peter 3: 18-22; Mark 1: 9-15

## *Lent 1*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Welcome to our online service, and perhaps this first Sunday in Lent is somewhat more than usually significant. Many of us are sacrificing our turn for corporate worship in an attempt to save the lives of those who may not be able to fight the Corona virus with the same robustness as most. Thank you for your faithfulness. God will honour this, your gift to others in our community.

I'm sure you have all had that experience where you have done one or other dirty job. Either you have made some huge changes in your garden or kitchen, or you have cleared out the garage after twenty years of "I'll get to it someday." Then you come inside, you leave your dirty outer clothes in the washing machine, and you either have an invigorating shower, or, you will soak in a sweet-smelling bath and let the water clean your body and your emotions. When you get out and dress and carry on with whatever is next in your day, you look and feel so clean, and so happy the dirty job is done, and you promise yourself the garden will emulate Eden, or that garage will never EVER get so cluttered again. A new life!

I think God had something of that in mind when God sent the flood. Noah and his family, the animals, and presumably plants to feed them, were saved, but all the evil of the world was washed away, and God started again. But there was a change. No longer did God fit in to the angry pagan god picture, a God who had to be appeased. Instead we have a God who promises – in fact enters into a covenant with creation – that God will never do anything as drastic again. Yes, we have floods, and recent disasters in Mozambique from the stormy, destructive Eloise, and the pictures we've all seen of the Augrabies falls and the Vaal dam, show us that God still allows floods, but he has promised never to destroy the whole world like that again. God will work with his people in a relationship rather than in a tyranny.

The first letter to Peter tells how we are all saved from our sin through the sacrifice of Jesus, even those, and here I am taking the interpretation from Clement of Alexandria who, in the year 200 interpreted this passage to mean that Jesus even went to hell to save those who had sinned "in the time of Noah". And we presume everyone since then too. Again, the wrath of God is given a merciful result in the sacrifice of Jesus. Those who have sinned have been forgiven. But the passage makes clear, we are saved through our attitude to the sacrifice of Jesus, and not because we have gone through the motions of baptism and got the certificate and the candle. Salvation is a personal, deliberate decision on our part.

Our Gospel speaks of the baptism of Jesus, where Jesus the carpenter went into the water, and the beloved Son of God came out to fulfil his messiah calling came out of it. Then 40 days of preparation - a sort of toughening up in the desert –and Jesus came back and began preaching the Kingdom of heaven. An aside shows us that things had changed. John the Baptist was in prison. His ministry was over, but Jesus' ministry had just begun. The Old Testament type of prophet was gone, and from this baptism, a new relationship with God would develop – one where God in God's son Jesus would go all the way to the cross so that we might die to sin and rise again in Christ to become one with him in the Kingdom he established on earth.

So as we go into another Lent, how do we allow today's readings to create new creatures? Firstly, we need to know that we are being called to a new way of life. We need to go through a type of baptism where our old lives are left behind, and we are cleansed and made new for something new we are called to do. That will mean sacrifices. We have all our old sins and habits to sacrifice, and lockdown has given us a whole lot of new ones. If you don't believe me, check some of the things you have said or replied on social media. Or remember some of the things you said to people on the television (if you are the sort of person that does talk to people on the television. If not, there are many other things you do that give you away). This will tell you not only about the stress you have been under, but about your default position. We can try very hard to paint ourselves as kind, civilised people, but under stress, the real "us" comes to the fore. If nothing else, this time of pandemic has given us an opportunity to look at the selves we had forgotten were there. We need to give up who we are and go through a spiritual washing away of the dirt of our lives, and Lent gives us a time to focus on this.

Secondly, we need to ask forgiveness of God and those we have sinned against, (you may be let off for those on the TV). You may also need to put right what went wrong in some of your closest relationships. Lockdown has meant we are boxed up with people and they have seen the worst and the best of us. Even if an apology is not necessary, we would probably be helped by being totally honest about what this time has meant. We need to go to God with what we have found out about ourselves and ask for forgiveness, and allow God to heal us.

Thirdly we need to look to what God is asking of us, not only once the pandemic is over – whenever that will be, but also now. We have a ministry in these difficult times, and Lent is a time to set our faces towards whatever Jerusalem is being asked of us, and to prepare ourselves for our resurrected ministry. As Jesus went into the wilderness to be tested, so are we now being tested. Whatever our circumstances, we live with or next door to people, we work with people, we shop and are served by people, and for those of us who are seen to be lonely, many of us are being helped by people who have seen our situation and are trying to help, however irritating that can be. How is this limited ministry building us into the kind of people Jesus can take along with him to a crucifixion and into a resurrected life?

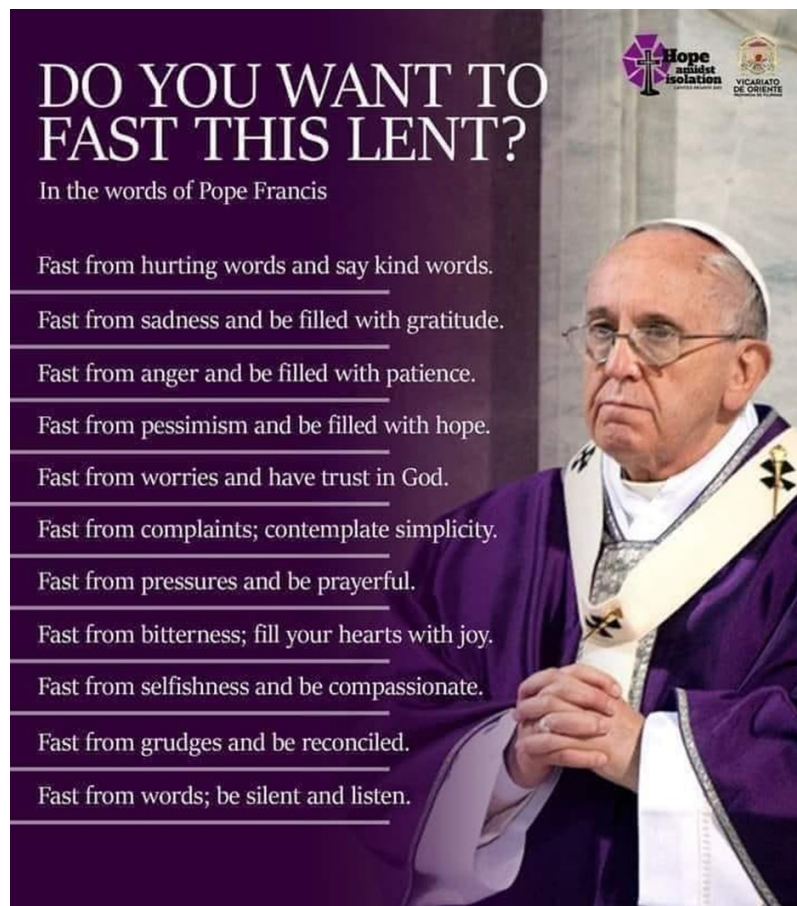
I was struck earlier on this month, when watching a number of webinars and sundry broadcasts where two of our epidemiologists, professor Shabir Mahdi and professor Glenda Gray were being interviewed on vaccine issues. At one stage Professor Mahdi said that this virus has made us very humble. In other words we can't claim to be in control as we like to be. To defeat it, we must understand it. Professor Gray said that dealing with this virus and its vaccines was like building an aeroplane while it is still in flight. We have given recognition to the medical people on the frontline, in our hospitals, and emergency services. But what about the researchers? Those ordinary people whose lives are made up of looking for cures for diseases. For every medicine that works, there are dozens if not hundreds of remedies that fail, and they have to go back to the drawing board and start again. The companies that manufacture the medicines make money out of it, but we must remember that all those failed remedies were made by researchers

who still need to have their monthly salaries. Pharmaceuticals have their element of risk. An enormous amount is asked of our academics and their research too.

So how much pressure has been put on these researchers to find the vaccine? How many sleepless nights have they had? What long hours have they worked? How many other areas of research, HIV, TB to name just a few have been put on hold while we look for or examine a vaccine which will allow our lives to go back to some form of normality? What of the people who are waiting for those other cures? And how does the entire profession cope with the angry people whose desperation is making them nasty and critical of the research and the companies that fund it and the medical services whose care of them is sometimes overwhelmed because of the numbers of cases they are dealing with? This surely is an example of a type of sacrifice akin to the crucifixion. The sin of big parties and illegal gatherings and carelessness about masks creates a crucifixion for so many others. We are assured of a resurrection – although there must have been times when every medical person said, in his or her own idiom “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me.”

And where are we in this? Are we the critics who mock and call “crucify him” to the efforts on our behalf? Or are we patiently walking alongside our Saviour, wishing the suffering could be avoided, but trying to believe that God is in all of this, and that nothing is happening without the knowledge of God? Can we be part of the ultimate Resurrection which will surely come out of the pandemic?

And in general terms, will we take Lent seriously? Will we willingly sacrifice those things which ultimately destroy us? Will we go through a type of baptism of cleansing and restore our relationship with God and with one another? Will we look to the ultimate salvation by Jesus and prepare ourselves for our part in that great work? We are truly called to a time of prayer and fasting, and to that end, I would like to end with some words from Pope Francis



**DO YOU WANT TO FAST THIS LENT?**  
In the words of Pope Francis

- Fast from hurting words and say kind words.
- Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.
- Fast from anger and be filled with patience.
- Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.
- Fast from worries and have trust in God.
- Fast from complaints; contemplate simplicity.
- Fast from pressures and be prayerful.
- Fast from bitterness; fill your hearts with joy.
- Fast from selfishness and be compassionate.
- Fast from grudges and be reconciled.
- Fast from words; be silent and listen.

**Hope amidst isolation**  
VICARIATO DE ORIENTE

