

Feria, 04.02.21

May I speak in the name of God, who is Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

I have read this gospel many, many times, but when I looked at it in preparation for today I was struck by the opening phrase:

“Jesus called the twelve and began to send them out two by two...”

That phrase, ‘two by two’, took me to another reference of ‘two by two’, or pairings, in the story of Noah and I felt intrigued by the concept of covenant and the different expressions of it. What struck me most was the juxtaposition of the gathering in, two by two, and the sending out, two by two, both in this context of covenant.

The story of Noah begins early in the book of Genesis, in chapter six to be exact, straight after the listing of the descendants of Eve and Adam and perhaps I might remind you of that story.

God sees that there is great wickedness in the earth and that amongst humanity:

“Every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.”

God is not just sorry to have made humankind, but is grieved to the heart.

Hence comes the idea of blotting out humanity as well as the animals, the creeping things and the birds of the air. All, that is, apart from Noah, who is described as a righteous man, blameless in his generation, and who has found favour with God.

So it is that God instructs Noah to build an ark of cypress wood, which he is to enter with his wife, his sons and their wives and *two* of every living thing, male and female. Once inside, we are told that God 'shuts them in'. The flood comes and covers the earth for forty days and nights, killing every living thing apart from those in the ark.

At the end of one hundred and fifty days the waters abate and the ark comes to rest on the mountains of Ararat. Finally, God sends Noah and his family, the birds, the animals and every creeping thing out to repopulate the earth.

Noah builds an altar and offers burnt offerings to God, which pleases God so much that God decides never again to curse the ground because of humankind or to destroy every living thing.

The story ends with God blessing Noah and his family, giving them authority over creation. A Covenant is established with Noah and his descendants and with every living creature, that never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth. The rainbow becomes the sign of that covenant.

This covenant, then, came about in response to a great gathering *in*, even a *shutting in*. The righteous man was shut away whilst God wreaked a purifying destruction on the earth through the waters of the flood.

What a contrast with our gospel today and with the outworking of the new covenant.

Jesus, too, has spent forty days and nights in a place cut off from the rest of the world, this time in the wilderness rather than the bowels of the ark as it navigates the flood. And the animal motif appears again as Mark tells us that Jesus had, if not every living animal, wild beasts for company, as well as angels.

But here the stories part ways, because the forty days Jesus spends in the wilderness are not intended for the purifying destruction of *life*, as with the flood, but for the purifying of *purpose and fortitude*, releasing him to begin his public ministry of preaching, teaching and healing.

God might still be grieved to the heart but, this time, the covenant will work quite differently, bringing life, not death, to the people of God who have, yet again, gone astray. In the words of the letter to the Hebrews, Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant, a covenant of grace which offers fullness of life, not only in the heavenly Jerusalem, but now in this mortal life.

Where the covenant with Noah came through the death of *all* humanity *apart* from one man and his family, *this* covenant will come about through the death, not of all humanity, but of *only one* man, Jesus. His body alone will be broken apart and instead of the waters of the flood, water will come from his pierced body to cleanse and renew.

Also to note is that in the mediation of this new covenant, the righteous are not to be shut away. Quite the opposite: the twelve are sent out to be signs of God's grace, to be forerunners of this *new* covenant. Far from only sending them out once redemption has *occurred*, Jesus sends the disciples out to be signs of redemption *breaking through*.

Where purification and renewal required the *death* of humanity, now purification and renewal, ultimately realised in the cross and resurrection, require the *engagement* of humanity.

And this must be so for us, for whilst redemption has been realised through the cross, still God's heart must surely grieve as God's people cry out for love, joy and hope, for peace, justice and mercy.

Just as with the disciples, Christ calls *us* to engage and sends us out to proclaim that redemption has dawned and to be ambassadors of the new covenant.

So as we approach Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent, may we, like those first disciples, respond to Christ's call to engage, to proclaim that redemption has dawned and to be ambassadors for the new covenant of life and grace.

Amen.