

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany - Year B

5th February 2012

How big is our God? The enthusiastic poetry of Isaiah (Isa.40.21-31) captures the wonder, excitement and the hugeness of God in memorable world pictures. God is so big that all the oceans fit in his palm. The powerful nations of the earth are like a drop in a bucket or dust which weighs nothing. We are like grasshoppers!. He is strong, everlasting, tireless, complete in his understanding.

Yet this powerful, Creator has time for us. "He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless." This good news becomes a reality in the person of Jesus. Mark presents Jesus doing just that in his first chapter. Today's gospel, Mark 1.29-39 shows the lifting up of the sick, the casting out of demons. Mark does not bother with birth stories and explanations about Jesus. He is anxious to get to the point quickly. Jesus spoke and acted authoritatively. He broke into creation with creative power giving to little people, the sick and the demon-possessed.

Jesus himself was enthusiastic about the liberation he was bringing to the ill and demon-possessed. The people greeted him with enthusiasm—"the whole city was gathered around the door"; "everyone is searching for you". Jesus himself was anxious to move on to the neighbouring towns in Galilee to bring the good news of the Kingdom of God and to be good news himself in his liberating power.

In Paul we meet another enthusiast. He'll do anything to spread the good news about Jesus. He says "I have become all things to all people" in order to win them over for the sake of the gospel. (1 Cor. 9.16-23)

How big is our God? How enthusiastic are we for the sake of the gospel? How willing are we to mix with people unlike ourselves in order to share with them the blessings of Christ? How willing are we to tell how great God is?

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Sunday 12th February - Year B

We all know about dress codes. –no singlets or thongs etc. Hotels, clubs, SACA grounds all impose codes in order to preserve perceived standards. How awful it feels to be turned away because you have not measured up. Spoken or unspoken codes apply in many areas of life.

The Temple had its own code of holiness. Ritual cleanness was regulated to preserve the purity of the Temple and those who worshipped there. Lepers were ritually unclean and outcast. There were stringent rules to prevent contagion, and certification from a priest was necessary before a healed leper could participate in society. The leper's approach to Jesus was forbidden by the Law. (Mark 1. 40-45)

So why did Jesus break the Law? "If you choose, you can make me clean," said the leper. He had seen Jesus' compassionate and authoritative dealings with illness and demon-possession. He probably guessed Jesus' response -"moved with pity" and he knew from the story of Naaman (2 Kings 5.1-14) that healing came from trusting in the word of a man of God. Compassion was Jesus' code, not holiness.

Which code do we follow: the code of holiness or the code of compassion? When do we as individuals or as a Church touch the 'untouchables' of our community? Will we welcome people to mingle among us only when they wear the right clothes or behave in the right way? The noisy child in church? People of different backgrounds? Those in need of food and clothing?

In the Collect for today we pray for the gifts of compassion and self control that in serving others we may receive the reward of eternal life (the imperishable wreath—1 Cor. 9.24-27) Compassion is our code.

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

Sunday 19th February - Year B

Things we have done or haven't done or what others have or haven't done to us can distort our lives. Some people remain sad, have low self-esteem, act continually like a victim, or distrust others so that they seem paralysed and unable to move forward in their lives. Maybe this has been your experience too at some stage of your life. Such is the power of *blame* and *guilt* of sin to constrain us

The nature of God is to liberate people bound by the sins of the past. Isaiah 43.18-25 "I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins". God's very nature is to forgive and to make things new.

The truth of God's nature is revealed in Jesus. Mark's gospel show Jesus revealing God as the one who heals, forgives, restores and liberates. Mark 2. 1-12. "Your sins are forgiven" provoked outrage because only God can forgive sins but for Jesus healing and forgiveness were interlinked. "Do you want me to act in the power of God to heal or in the power of God to forgive?" What Jesus said freed the paralytic to move into the future. His freedom to walk was an outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual truth of forgiveness.

Who are you in the story of the paralysed man? Are you so paralysed by guilt and blame that you cannot even ask for forgiveness? Are you someone going to extraordinary lengths to bring your suffering friend to Jesus? Or are you questioning in your heart that Jesus has such authority and power?

In Jesus every one of God's promises is a Yes, Paul reminds us (2 Cor. 1.16-22). Through him we say *Amen* to the absolution offered to us. (see p.120 **APBA**)

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

YEAR B

Sunday 26th February 2012

1. **Fiction is full of covenant relationships:** Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn were blood brothers; the Jedi knights were bound in a universal battle against evil. The Fellowship of the Ring and the Narnia Chronicles, likewise show that we human beings are captured by stories of covenant. Why then do we not get equally enraptured by the greatest covenant of all, that between God and us, worked out in flesh and blood through Jesus Christ.

2. **A covenant is an agreement between two parties;** sometimes equal parties (as in the marriage covenant) but in the case of God and Noah between unequal parties. (Genesis 9.8-17) This was an act of grace, an undeserved favour from God, who guaranteed to Noah and his family that the world would never again be destroyed by a flood. The rainbow was a sign of God's mercy, a promise of better things to come, and of God's care for every living creature. This is the first covenant in the Bible and points forward to a succession of covenants that God made to an undeserving people to bring them back to him.

3. **An understanding of this covenant relationship helps us to understand the final covenant,** the New Covenant in Jesus Christ which Peter outlines in 1 Peter 3.18-22. The covenant made with Noah and his family was limited. God had brought them safely through the waters of death, but now there was a new covenant, one made through the death and resurrection of Jesus who even before he had risen had proclaimed salvation to those disobedient ones who had suffered God's punishment in the days of Noah.. For all of us, then, baptism is a sign of God's forgiveness. It is an act of grace from God.

4. **In his baptism by John, (Mark 1.9-15) Jesus' identity and status before God are publicly affirmed.** Mark links the baptism with the period of preparation in the wilderness, from where doubts overcome and resolve strengthened by the Spirit, Jesus moves immediately into ministry.

5. **Our Prayer Book reminds us (p.51) that *Baptism is the gift of our Lord Jesus Christ*** and at Baptism each of us enters into a covenant relationship with God. The promises of God for new life are *visibly signed and sealed* and we make promises in return. This is a covenant relationship far more powerful than Tom's and Huckleberry's or the Jedi's or the Fellowship of the Ring. If only we took seriously our promises and believe that God's promises are sure, that through Baptism we have new life and are strengthened in the Spirit for ministry!