

## FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

26 March, 2006

1. **John 43. 14-21 contains one of the best known verses of the Bible** - *For God so loved the world ...* Nicodemus had just visited Jesus to be told that new birth with the Spirit was the means of eternal life - not all the knowledge of a theologian, or the virtues of a godly life, or the privilege of birth. Eternal life comes through God's gracious mercy and our belief in his saving power through Jesus Christ.
2. **Jesus used the story of the serpent from Numbers** as a parable for his own crucifixion. The story of the serpent (Numbers 21.-9) comes to us from an ancient people. Here was an undeserving people grizzling against God's providence and the harshness of desert conditions. Coming to their senses when death threatened them they implored God, through Moses' intercession, for salvation. The raised snake became a symbol of God's mercy and love for his people for by looking on it they were given life. The poisonous snake (reminiscent of the snake in the Garden of Eden) is set on a pole, and everyone suffering from the bite of a snake is healed by gazing on the snake lifted high. Through the death of one the evil in the others was overcome. Similarly, Christ, bearing the sins of the world is set on a cross, and lifted up. Those who gaze on him also are lifted up and raised from death with him.
3. **Jesus' words in John point to God's purpose**, not of judgment but of love and light and life. Judgment only comes by comparison - when we gaze on Jesus on the cross, we judge ourselves. *When I survey the wondrous cross (AHB 258)* expresses it well.
4. **Ephesians 2.1-10 emphasizes the grace of God.** Left to ourselves our natural inclinations and sinful actions will lead only to death. But God loves us too much to let us die. Through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus he has made us alive with Christ. By faith we are united with Christ and are raised with him to new life. None of this is our own doing; it is God's gracious love and mercy which saves us. Our good works do not effect our salvation, but in new life we are created for good works, that is a life of love of God and love of neighbour, a life of service.

## FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

5 March, 2006

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!

## SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

12 March, 2006

1. **Does your name have a meaning?** No matter how they are chosen, our names are important because they give us our identity and our understanding of ourselves. Abram's name change to Abraham (Genesis 17.1-7, 15-16) is a sign of his covenant relationship with God for Abraham means 'ancestor of a multitude'. Sarah - princess - was one whom 'kings of peoples' shall come from. God made promises to Abraham and his descendants about everlasting relationship and security. And Abraham believed and obeyed.
2. **In the early Church, the Jewish Christians** thought themselves as privileged in relation to Gentile Christians because they were descended from Abraham. Romans 4.13-25 corrected this view. Abraham (a pre-Jewish Aramean) was a man of faith, chosen to be the father of people of faith. We are his descendants through faith (not law or blood). He is the prototype of all who now respond to God as he did.
3. **Peter declared Jesus to be the Messiah**, but Jesus preferred the name Son of Man, a title of an enigmatic figure in Daniel who was the head of the saints of the most high and who knew that the way to future glory comes through suffering. In Mark 8.31-38 Jesus predicted his own suffering and death and resurrection. Jesus went on to tell the disciples that self-denial is the only way to achieve true life.
4. **In our baptism (our covenant with God)** we take on our Christian identity. Our names are 'Christian names' and our identity comes from that close relationship with God, Father Son and Spirit. The baptism service (AAPB p.60) enjoins us among other things to 'live as a disciple of Christ ... keep the faith'. As children our parents and godparents are responsible for nurturing a faithful life, but then as adults we must assume that responsibility.
5. **The life of faith is modeled on the pattern of Jesus:** serving others because they have need, being vulnerable to criticism when doing what is right, living humbly, growing through pain, challenging injustice and unfairness, all the time believing, trusting and obeying God whose promises are sure. All our life we can continue growing into our covenant relationship.

## THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

19 March, 2006

1. **The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20.1-17)** constitute the core of the Law to which all other laws related. They deal with relationship with God and relationship with neighbour. They are community-oriented, aimed at preserving the identity of the nation, and very practical. God had kept his promise of salvation and preservation of the people as they moved towards the land promised to them. Their behaviour needed to be consonant with that liberation. The ten commandments given to Moses were not restrictive laws but rather liberating to help them be a people of holiness and compassion. Jesus' summary of the laws which we use more often in our worship (AAPB p.120), highlights these two aspects.
2. **The Temple complex of buildings in Jerusalem** was the centre of sacrificial worship, for giving honour to God. In the outer courts vendors supplied worshippers with animals for sacrifice and money was changed into Temple currency. They were necessary activities but the focus had moved from the primary concern of the Temple to honour God. The crucifixion is interpreted by John (John 2.13-22) as equivalent to the profanation of the Temple, and implicitly the resurrection of Jesus is the reconstruction and reconsecration of this holy place. Jesus is the sanctuary - where God dwells.
3. **Even in Paul's day the death and resurrection were beyond rational thought - incomprehensible and foolish** (1 Cor. 1.19.8-25). Our acceptance of this foolishness as wisdom and power from God is an act of faith. To believe God is to acknowledge that he acts in ways that are not ours, that all things are possible to him, and that the mystery of God is encountered in Jesus, the one who has died, is risen and will come again.
4. **Lent is a time to reconsider our faith** and this may involve self-cleansing and self-consecration to prepare our bodies to be dwelling-places of God's Spirit. Involved in this are our will to believe and our submission to the Spirit.
5. **The Collect for today succinctly brings these thoughts together.** May our prayer come to reality as we become living temples of God's love and all our actions give glory and honour to him.