

Homily of First Sunday of Lent, Year B, 2024

Genesis 9:8-15; Psalm 25:4-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:12-15

The first reading tells us about God's covenant with Noah. I think that what Noah did after surviving the flood made possible God's covenant with him. Scripture says, "Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and choosing from every clean animal and every clean bird, he offered burnt offerings on the altar. When the Lord smelled the sweet odor, the Lord said to himself: Never again will I curse the ground because of human beings, since the desires of the human heart are evil from youth; nor will I ever again strike down every living being, as I have done. All the days of the earth, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease" (Genesis 8:18-22). Noah did not take his surviving the flood for granted. He built an altar to the Lord and offered a generous sacrifice. Noah's gratitude, thanksgiving, and putting God first earned him God's covenant. This teaches us the power of gratitude, thanksgiving, and putting God first. May we be able to offer God sweet smelling sacrifice. May God smell our sacrifice and renew his covenant with us. Amen.

The entire first reading contains details of God's covenant with Noah. In the covenant, God says, "I set my bow in the clouds to serve as a sign of the covenant between me and the earth" (Genesis 9:13). In the Old Testament, the bow is a symbol of weapon or an instrument of war. In other words, God is saying, "I hang up my weapon of destruction in the cloud as a sign of my covenant." God swore to Noah as we have read, "Never again will I... strike down every living being, as I have done" (Genesis 8:21). "... never again shall all bodily creatures be destroyed by waters of a flood; there shall not be another flood to devastate the earth" (Genesis 9:11). On Good Friday, a New Everlasting Covenant is made. Jesus hangs on the Cross as a symbol of forgiveness of sin, mercy, and redemption to humanity. Unlike the bow that symbolizes an instrument of destruction, Jesus symbolizes the instrument of God's forgiveness, mercy, and redemption.

I still remember the impressive way my catechism teacher, years ago, presented the story of Noah. He said that Noah preached to his people to repent from their sinful life to avert the impending rain and flood; but they did not believe him. They preferred their worldly and sinful life. When the rain and flood came, they all perished. My catechism teacher, rightly, interpreted the words in the second reading, "... God patiently waited in the days of Noah during the building of the ark" (1 Peter 3:20).

God is, also, waiting patiently for each of us. Jesus warns us in today's gospel, "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). Let us not harden our hearts as Noah's people did. The Lenten Season is one of the special times God invites us to come back to the source of our salvation. It is a season of repentance and a season of grace.

We read from Prophet Joel on Ash Wednesday, "Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning. Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God" (Joel 2:12-13). God declares, "For I find no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies... Turn back and live!" (Ezekiel 18:32). It is a soul-searching journey. I am invited, you are invited to turn away from sins and disengage from anything that can bring destruction to my life, my faith, my career, my business, my finance, my family, my vocation, my position, my job, my marriage, my future, and so on.

In today's gospel reading, the Spirit drove Jesus into the desert, where he was tempted by Satan. Jesus was among wild beasts, but the angels ministered to him. In the same way, our life is a desert. Our afflictions, trials, and temptations are wild beasts. We pray that God sends his angels to minister to us and lead us to victory through it all. Amen.

We conclude with praying Psalm 91:11-13, "For he commands his angels with regard to you, to guard you wherever you go. With their hands, they shall support you, lest you strike your foot against a stone. You can tread upon the asp and the viper, trample the lion and the dragon." Amen.

Fr. Martin Eke, MSP