

St Peter's, Mount Park Road, W5 2RU
Sunday 22nd February 2015
Lent 1

"I establish my covenant with you." (Genesis 9.1 I)

I have struggled this year in deciding upon my Lenten fast. Each year, a few weeks from Ash Wednesday we begin to reflect upon what kind of Lenten discipline might be followed. When I was an enthusiastic student it could be quite, shall we say courageous; being generous others might say, idealistic. One year I decided to eat only one meal a day, until my cousin's father-in-law, who was a GP remonstrated with me saying I was being daft and putting my health at risk. As time has gone on and fashions changed attitudes to the Lenten discipline have varied. When I was younger we seemed to concentrate on giving things up. Then this was thought to be too negative so we were encouraged to take something on. Eventually came the question, "what is the point?"

So I have been reflecting upon what the Lenten disciplines means and what I should or shouldn't be doing depending on the perspective taken.

Initially it would seem the Lenten discipline is about denial. The image we are often given is of holy men and women abstaining from food, drink or comforts through the forty days of the season in preparation for the great celebration of Easter. I do find that a confusing or difficult image; the ascetic, sitting in a pile of dust, wasting away, attempting to live on water. I'm not sure that is a helpful image.

Then there is the view of Lenten discipline aiming to prepare us for the great feast of the Resurrection of our Lord; with abstinence or edification preparing the way for a heightened understanding or appreciation of our faith and festal celebration. This still doesn't ring completely...fulsome.

There has to be more to the tradition of the Lenten fast than that surely. Just giving something up to heighten the experience of the other doesn't seem enough. We don't do things in the life of faith just for the sake of it. There should always a good reason behind an action or a ritual, and as my training incumbent once said whilst discussing what I wanted to include in my first mass, "If there is no point in it don't do it."

So here I am reflecting on what is the point of the Lenten discipline. It should have more to it than raising the level of expectation in another festival. It should be more than just losing a few pounds or edifying the mind.

The readings we have today mention covenant, either overtly or by suggestion. God makes a covenant with Noah and through Noah with us. God will never bring such devastation upon the earth again and this covenant is symbolised in the rainbow. Peter refers to the covenant with Noah and that between God and Jesus and through Jesus to us in the waters of baptism. Here covenant is more than just about promise or contract. It is about changing relationships and perspectives. In truth it is about changing worlds.

In the story of Noah God is reflecting the changing understanding of our relationship with God. Before the flood we are still closely related to the beginnings, to creation and Eden. Now the relationship with God is more grown up, more understanding of our nature and God's part in that. It almost seems in this passage as though God is apologising. In Peter's letter the writer is exploring a changing relationship through covenant between God and people, first by reflecting on the particular relationship between God and Noah and then the salvific relationship with Jesus as God's Son. We share in this covenant through our baptism, a covenant that opens the way to salvation through the cross and the empty tomb, through the Easter story. This is where the Lenten discipline gains its point, its purpose.

To enter into the Lenten discipline is to focus particularly on seeking a renewal of that relationship, of our covenant with God. To explore afresh what God means to us, how important the good news is to our lives and how we might renew that relationship, regain that importance as central to who we are; all finally expressed in the celebrations of Easter.

We are in the midst of our stewardship programme for 2015. We should see stewardship in light of that same covenant making. A renewing of our commitment, our covenant with God; through prayer, through fasting and through giving. We have a tangible opportunity to do this on 8th March, to pledge our personal stewardship of time, talents and money to the mission and ministry of God at St Peter's as well as the wider Diocesan and National church. Stewardship then is about our relationship with God and our commitment to Him, it is our covenant, our discipline.

What shall I be doing as part of my Lenten discipline? That will be between me and my pledge card.