

## Genesis 9:8-17

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: <sup>9</sup> "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you <sup>10</sup> and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. <sup>11</sup> I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth."

<sup>12</sup> And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: <sup>13</sup> I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. <sup>14</sup> Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, <sup>15</sup> I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. <sup>16</sup> Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth."

<sup>17</sup> So God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth."

## 1 Peter 3:18-22

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. <sup>19</sup> After being made alive,<sup>Ⓜ</sup> he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits— <sup>20</sup> to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, <sup>21</sup> and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God.<sup>Ⓜ</sup> It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, <sup>22</sup> who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

## Mark 1:9-15

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

<sup>12</sup> At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, <sup>13</sup> and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted<sup>Ⓜ</sup> by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

<sup>14</sup> After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. <sup>15</sup> "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

**Peter writes** his first letter from Rome and addresses it to persecuted Christians across Asia Minor, which is modern Turkey. As befits the recipients the letter is all about suffering — recognising that these Christians suffer, as it were, as exiles — they were misunderstood, alienated and persecuted by the rest of the world. But Peter suggests that there is usefulness to their suffering — in the dignity with which they bear that suffering and in their response to persecution these Christians may demonstrate the generous love of Christ. He gets to say this because he has suffered no less than they.

In the short passage we read, Peter weaved together Jesus's forty days in the wilderness together with Noah's ark and baptism — heartening his largely gentile listeners by binding them into the larger faith story of Christianity.

But this emphasis on suffering has got me wondering. In this day we are averse to suffering. We are a people who expect comfortableness. Suffering is only expected by those who want to

get shredded in the gym (no pain no gain!), or by dieters for weight-loss. So — why would Jesus spend forty days fasting? And what is the point of such suffering anyway?

Fasting is a practice in many religions. We pay less attention to the needs and desires of the body to pay more attention to the spiritual. It may encourage weight loss, but this is really not the point — it is about the change of focus. We turn away from the vanity of the world, the self-care and the seeming, and the self-projection to pray and to be with God.

It may seem like an odd thing for Jesus to do as he began his ministry after baptism — it is not what most would call 'hitting the ground running', but it was exactly what was called for: after the glorious moment of the baptism and the Spirit descending on him like a dove, came the self-abnegation. Jesus's life and ministry as a whole, glorious as it was, was not about the glory, but the self-giving, the self-emptying. In this way the beginning almost predicts the self-giving of the cross for the sake of others.

Again, that 40 days of *prayer* is not about the self. Prayer is fundamentally a reorientation of your spirit, away from self, towards God, towards your neighbour. Prayer is relational and outward-facing. You can, of course pray for yourself — and you really should — but in the end prayer that stays only within the confined orbit of your own little wants and needs is immature prayer. It can take some time to take our prayers out of self and genuinely directed elsewhere. That is part of the point.

In the early centuries of Christianity a significant debate developed about whether God could suffer. Greek philosophy suggested that if God suffered, he was *changed* to less than perfect, or else made more perfect. Either way, if God suffered then he must change, and this made no sense. Remarkably, this has only really been overturned since the 1970s — it is now generally recognised that this was a wrong theological turn. Jesus suffered. He suffered hunger and thirst in the desert. He suffered the physical agony of the cross, the emotional torment injustice and hatred and the sense of abandonment. He suffered in all the ways a human can suffer.

How did this benefit us? Put briefly, the suffering is the proof of love, compassion and true empathy.

When we suffer — mentally, physically or emotionally — our best comfort is the person who lovingly stands alongside us without trying to solve us or blame us. We are comforted by someone *feeling* our pain, and not flinching from it, no matter how uncomfortable they are in the moment. Apart from all the other aspects of salvation that Jesus worked, he demonstrated in the clearest terms that *God did love, because God could suffer*, and that in this suffering he was always with victims — because he himself had accepted being a victim.

If and when we suffer, we need to do it in a Christlike way. Fasting during Lent? Don't make a show of it, but really use the experience to intercede for the poor and the hungry, for the victims of injustice, war or natural disaster. A victim of injustice yourself? Don't make a martyr of yourself, seek justice, but also use that experience to open your compassion for others, and to rise above bitterness or vengeance. This is what Peter urges his readers.

And remember too that any great journey, any great venture involves discomfort, exhaustion, hardship, but also that without such struggle we will never reach the promised land — that kingdom that Jesus suffered to invoke.

Amen. SDG.