

## Opening Up Faith: Launching Out!

Genesis 9<sup>8-17</sup>; Psalm 25<sup>1-9</sup>; 1 Peter 3<sup>18-end</sup>; Mark 1<sup>9-15</sup>

*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near.  
[Mark 1<sup>15</sup>]*

Before we get to the sermon proper today, I would fail, as a preacher, if I did not spend a few moments on one of the most difficult passages of the New Testament (I understand now why none of my colleagues volunteered to preach this week).

It is 1 Peter 3<sup>19</sup> - **in which he also went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison**. This passage has profound theological and pastoral significance and a great deal of ink has been devoted to its interpretation. In summary:

1. There are hard-liners who reject the idea that this offers any hope to those who have not consciously accepted Christ in their life-time. They interpret this passage as saying that Jesus descended to the dead to proclaim to them that their fate is sealed. It is a proclamation of victory: Jesus won; the Devil lost. They are doomed. There are, absolutely, no second chances with God.
2. There are some Liberals who would interpret this as metaphor with no real event and as an expression of universalism.
3. There are those who limit these words to fallen angels – those who before the flood had associated with humans and had children with them [Genesis 6<sup>4</sup>]. This is to them and to them only a message of hope and does not apply universally.
4. There are those who limit this passage to those who died in the flood, giving them a chance to repent after that destructive act of God as they had no opportunity to be saved in the Ark and, again, does not apply universally.
5. There are also those who see in this a second chance for everyone and that after this life there is a chance to consider again the invitation to repent and believe.

The first thing I want to point out that this passage is about Christ. It was he who was sent at the will of God the Father to die to make salvation possible. The text is strange in that it doesn't use the usual New Testament word for preaching (εὐαγγελιον), proclaiming Good News, but a more general word (κηρυξεν) which is used without a qualifying noun (eg, gospel or kingdom). It is only through him that salvation is possible at all.

The second is that there are three things particularly to note:

- i. That Jesus really did die (against the accusation that his death wasn't real), or he could not have visited the place of the dead (Hades);
- ii. That the triumph of Christ in death, even before the resurrection, is universal (because the cross defeated sin and the devil – the resurrection defeated death); and
- iii. That no corner of creation or existence is not reachable by the grace of God.

The third is to remember that once dead time has no meaning and in the timelessness of God's being the past, the present and the future are as one inhabited by God in the community of the Trinity. Jesus' visit to the place of the dead is not something that can appear on a diary because it happened out of time and all who will have died, all who are dead and all who will die will be there.

It may be heretical, but I believe it consistent with the character of God, that Jesus' voice may well be the first you hear after you have died if you have not already consciously accepted his invitation to repent and believe. I cannot go as far as predicting that all will accept this as no-one is forced to accept God's grace, but it is consistent with what Peter goes on to say, **the Gospel is proclaimed, even to the dead, so that, though they have been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does.**

It certainly would be heretical to say that death is more powerful than grace!

Now the sermon, but in brief:

Our Christian life is launched at our Baptism – it is the most powerful means of grace. Baptism is a means of grace and it is in itself a reminder that **Christ also suffered for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring [us] to God.**

- ✘ As Jesus identified with humanity in his baptism, so we identify with him in our baptism. Just as the **bow in the clouds** was the sign of the Covenant to Noah and those who came after him, baptism becomes a sign – not just the promise not to destroy but to be **made alive in the spirit.**
- ✘ Peter reminds us that, as with Noah in the Ark, baptism saves – **not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience.**
- ✘ It is a symbol of death and resurrection. Again, Peter: Baptism is **through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.** The burial of our old life and the resurrection to a new life in God is the Good News.

One of the things we prepare for through Lent is the rededication of our baptismal promises on Easter Day. Have we maintained the new life that is the gift of God to us; have we honoured that resurrection to a new life that God made possible?

When adults are baptised by immersion, in that wonderful visual aid of burial and resurrection, the tradition is that you ‘go through’ the water entering, where possible, on one side and leaving by the other. In one memorable baptism one chap made his way up towards me and was wearing a conservation tee-shirt with a picture of a rhino on the front. I thought that it wasn’t entirely appropriate that the congregation were laughing as the candidate entered the water. It was after the baptism, as he left the water, that I understood: one the back of the tee-shirt was the legend, ‘*save a horny friend!*’ It may very well have been accidental, or it might have been an honest statement!

We all need some honesty about what we have been saved from (even if we didn’t have it on a tee-shirt for all to see) and what we are saved for – and while we cannot be baptised again we can be sure that God is always willing to renew that covenant with us.