

First Sunday of Lent

Jubilee

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Why do we start Lent with a rainbow? To understand why the Church begins lent this year by going back to the flood and God's covenant with Noah, we need to appreciate the plight of the Jews in Jesus' day.

In Jesus day, many felt like they were drowning in a new flood. The basis of Jewish society was the family farm. However most farming families, had barely enough land to make a living in a good year. In a bad year, the small farmer and his family would have to eat their seed corn to make it through the winter and then would have to borrow seed the next spring to sow his next crop.

The only thing a farmer had for collateral for the loan would be the farm itself. Thus another bad year in a row and he would have lost everything. It was not uncommon that the farmer himself together with his wife and children would all be sold into debt-bondage if not slavery to pay back what was owed. The best he could hope for would be to be allowed to remain working on the farm, but now as a tenant, his land no longer his own.

The result was something that we are still talking about today, growing income inequality – in Jesus day, the accumulation of land and its wealth into the hands of the few, especially Herod and his friends. On top of this, there were also the Romans who occupied the land with an iron fist and squeezed as much money out of the population as they could while keeping the peace.

At the time of the Jewish uprising thirty years after Jesus crucifixion the second building to be set ablaze, after the house of the high priest perceived to be a Roman collaborator, was the public archives to destroy the debt records.

It was to people flailing in such heavy waters that Jesus begins his ministry today by proclaiming a Jubilee: "The time is ripe. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news"

What was a Jubilee? It was the mother of all Sabbaths. The Sabbath came around every seventh day. After seven, seven year cycles of work, the

Scriptures called for the fiftieth year to be a great Sabbath, a Jubilee Year, in which debts which had accumulated over all those years - ancestral debt whose borrowers were long dead but whose debt remained a burden on their descendants - all these old debts were to be forgiven, all debt-slaves were to be set free, and the land was to be returned to its original owners.

In fact the land was itself to be given a year of rest, it was to lie fallow the whole year, allowing it to replenish itself, while the poor were permitted to harvest whatever the land would produce spontaneously of its own accord. Everyone and everything was to be given a fresh start.

Now as you might suspect, by the time of Jesus, the Jubilee was more symbol than reality. Religious lawyers had found ways around the letter of the law. Creditors could turn debts over to the courts for the year which could then collect the money without the creditors breaking the Sabbath. And so the parables of Jesus abound not only in debtors, tenant farmers, day laborers and rich absentee landowners but also in lawyers, judges and courts.

The year of Jubilee had faded from reality to a fairytale nostalgia by Jesus time, but Jesus was intent on retrieving its religious significance. Whatever the landowners might do, God remains true to his Word. And so Jesus calls a Jubilee. He proclaims that God has washed away our debt to him, that God has freed us from our bondage to past sin, and has put us back on our feet. Now is the time to start afresh, to turn back to God and the covenant he established with Moses at Sinai, with Abraham at Moriah, and with Noah after the great flood.

Peter tells us that the waters of the great flood also prefigure the waters of baptism. No longer a flood to destroy all mortal beings, Peter teaches that water is now a symbol of new life, washing away our old sin and bringing us to new birth. The old world of sin and suffering is to make way for a new world of peace and justice. Christ, through his own suffering and death, has put to death our own sins, and offers to raise up our weary souls to new life with him.

At the dawn of the new millennium in 2000, Pope John Paul also proclaimed a Jubilee. He proclaimed that once more the time was ripe to turn back to God with all our heart. The storm of death is spent, a rainbow lights the road ahead.

The time is always ripe for a change of heart. May we take this time of Lent to renew our lives, to forgive those who owe us, and harder yet, to forgive ourselves and release ourselves from whatever has us chained in its shackles and wash ourselves clean. Or today, to stand out in the falling snow, the world blanketed in beauty.