



**FIRST SUNDAY LENT 2006**

**Genesis 9: 8-15    1 Peter 3: 18-22    Mark 1: 12-15**

The journey to Easter has six steps. We take the first step today. Our journey this Sunday is in the company of animals.

The two stories, Noah in the ark and Jesus in the desert, have common threads. The first similarity is the location. At first glance we may not see the connection, but being alone in a desert is like being cast adrift in a flood. The familiar markers are gone. There is a sense of isolation.

Noah had his immediate family but all other ties of kinship were broken. In paper it was reported that a Turkish couple were feeling isolated in a sea of unfamiliar language and custom. These people and many others world-wide know the feeling of being adrift in a strange and seemingly threatening sea.

Jesus was alone in his desert, isolated from human company, but in the presence of forces, potentially threatening.

Both Noah and Jesus are said to have animal companions. It is difficult to get beyond the children's picture-book images of Noah's ark, where the meaning of the story is lost in sentimentality.

The story of Noah is the story of a world where violence is spiralling out of control and where a natural cataclysm mirrors human violence, in its attack on the landscape. Noah is an ordinary man. He has the dubious reputation of being the first drunkard of the Bible. When he hears God's word he does not plead for sinners as Abraham did. He does not lead his people to safety as Moses did. He doesn't speak at all. He does what he is told. He is saviour through his simple obedience

Noah's animal companions represent the complex web of life that is sometimes not apparent to us. None of us is an island. Humankind exists within the biodiversity of the planet. To attempt to live without acknowledging our place within the web of life is to condemn ourselves to death.

There is an ancient Jewish proverb which says,  
*"He who saves a single life, saves the whole world."*  
Noah is a symbol of the saving power of the ordinary person.

According to Mark's Gospel, Jesus does not choose the desert. The Spirit drives him out. The animals are not presented in the orderly fashion of the Ark, they are wild. We name animals as wild, if they resist the efforts we make to domesticate them. They are often used in mythology to represent the forces that threaten our existence.

The story suggests that Jesus spent his days in peaceful co-existence with these creatures. The story also reminds us of the vision of the new creation described in Isaiah 11:6-9, *where leopard will lie down with the kid.*

The picture of Jesus in the wilderness is a picture of the age of salvation. All creation is called to the universal harmony, which was dreamed of from the foundation of the world.

With the hints, in the story, of a new paradise, the figure of the tempter is now presented as a neutralised presence. The angels, the other characters of the paradise story, are shown serving at table. Against the backdrop of the desert, Jesus is a new Adam in the new creation.

The flood story depicts a new beginning through the medium of destruction, a type of radical spring cleaning. The desert story describes a new beginning without violence. The age of salvation is present with us.

The letter of Peter uses the Noah story to highlight the symbolism, that through the water we are saved. He combines this with the image of Jesus passing out of a bodily presence to emerge via death into a new presence and so give us the courage to follow and accept that we too are called to the transformations of the Christian journey.

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