

## Homily for the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent

Some of you might remember the movie, which was released last year – *Noah*. It had some pretty big names as actors: Russell Crow, Emma Watson, and Anthony Hopkins. And it made a pretty big splash – pun intended. But, it also got a lot of mixed reviews. On the positive side, some said that its artistic license and special effects allowed for secular culture to dialogue with the biblical narrative – getting people to talk about the Bible and God. On the negative end of the spectrum, I heard some say that it was just so far out there that it disguised the real Bible story to such a degree that the truth was unrecognizable. As for myself, I actually saw it with my family last summer when we were all on vacation down at the beach. And just like the general public, some of us were intrigued by it and others turned off.

Now, usually when we think of Noah, we think of that Old Testament prophet who heard God’s voice and obeyed. Kind of like – God told Noah once, and Noah jumped right up and built the ark – no doubts, no questions asked! However, the movie shows forth a more nuanced side of Noah – one that might be more relatable to our experience when it comes to hearing God’s voice and doing His divine will. For example, “while Noah clearly understands that the Flood will destroy all of creation, he’s confused as to why God chose him.” Also, Noah wonders why humanity “should be given a second chance when it seems certain

that they will only destroy the world a second time”. Now, “Noah never doubts God’s *justice*, but he strains himself to the breaking point trying to carry it out before he finally begins to understand God’s far more mysterious *mercy*.”

Mercy. Mercy is “the disposition toward loving-kindness and compassion.” Mercy pushes us to be concerned for another and ready to help when needed. In terms of God’s mercy towards us, His children, who fall into sin again and again despite our best efforts, mercy is experienced as God’s *patience* with us. In other words, if we don’t get it right the first or the fifth or the fifteenth time, God doesn’t give up on us. Even in our second reading today from the First Letter of Peter, we heard that although the people in the days when Noah built the ark refused to believe, “God *patiently* waited to receive them.” Patience. At the same time, those who lived around Noah did not heed God’s call to repentance at all; and thus, they were destroyed through water. But because God’s mercy is never-ending, He didn’t just give up on humanity then and there. He has been, and always will be, patient with His creation in this and every human age. He gives us another chance.

But just as when God made the Israelites offer sacrifices of bulls and other animals to remind them of their infidelity in the desert when they worshipped the golden calf – it was right before them every time they offered sacrifice to God – so now does God do with water. Now in Jesus Christ, water has become a means of manifesting God’s mercy, as we are washed clean of our sins in baptism – even

though formerly, in the time of Noah, it was the water of the great Flood that God used to correct humanity because of its depraved sinfulness! It's a reversal of fortunes. Another example would be fire. Fire can destroy, by burning something down. But it can also be used to strengthen – like in a kiln, when soft clay is baked to rigid strength.

Many things that are strong – strengths – can quickly become weaknesses without God's grace. For example, without grace, self-confidence can devolve into arrogance or self-reliance to the exclusion of God's help. At the same time, with God's grace, weaknesses can become strengths – for example, struggling with a particular sin can be an ever-present reminder of how much we need God's help to overcome it, and can also help us be able to identify with others in their weakness and help them, just as God has helped us.

And so, Lent is a time of focusing on our human weakness – certainly the weakness which causes us to sin, but also the weakness that is just a part of being human. Only when we are ready to accept, and even embrace our human weakness, our human finiteness, and our human limitations, will we really *let* God be our strength. We must allow ourselves to be vulnerable before God – even when the world says, “keep your guard, and trust no one.” And the three penitential practices of Lent bring this need to the fore: **fasting** – emptying our stomachs, so that we can feel our deeper hunger for God; **prayer** – emptying our

spirits in humility, so that the Lord can fill us up as we receive His grace; and **almsgiving** – emptying our pockets, realizing that everything we have is from God, and to share our blessings with those in need.

My friends, Lent is all about letting ourselves be vulnerable before God, so that He can forgive our sins and heal the wounds our sins have caused. He is ever-patient, ever-merciful, waiting for us to provide Him the space and the opportunity to do so. But the question remains, will we be patient enough to allow Him to do this in our lives? God bless you.