

## 1 Pet 3.20-22: TAKE THE PLEDGE

[Chelmsford 30 September 2012]

*A man fell into a pit and couldn't get himself out.*

- An empathetic person came along and said, "I *feel* for you down there"
- A self-pitying person came along and said, "You haven't seen anything until you've seen *MY* pit"
- An evasive person came along and avoided the subject of his pit altogether
- A tax man asked if he was paying taxes on the pit
- A council inspector asked if he had a permit to dig a pit
- A news reporter wanted the exclusive story on the man's pit
- An optimist said, "Things could be worse"
- A pessimist said, "Things *will* get worse"
- A Pharisee said, "Only bad people fall into pits"
- Confucius said, "If you had listened to me you wouldn't be in that pit"
- Buddha said, "Your pit is only a state of mind"
- But *Jesus*, seeing the man, took him by the hand and lifted him out of the pit.

Have you got the point? Christianity is first and foremost a rescue religion.

The fact is that one way or another, all of us need to be rescued from the pit in which we find ourselves.

Sometimes we say life is the absolute pits – and sadly that is often so.

Just this week in the course of my pastoral work I have encountered people in great distress. But the good news is that Jesus can make the difference – Jesus can bring hope and direction when life appears to be hopeless and without meaning.

To use Christian jargon, Jesus saves.

He saves us from the mess into which we have got ourselves.

He can save us too from our sin and from the dire consequences of our sin.

Jesus makes all the difference.

As regular members of this congregation will know, on Sunday mornings this autumn we are looking at the letter the Apostle Peter wrote to a group of newly baptised Christians who were finding life tough.

There he talks about baptism and salvation by drawing upon the story of Noah's ark.

Listen to what he has to say:

**"The few people in the boat - eight in all - were saved by the water, which was a symbol pointing to baptism, which now saves you. It is not the washing away of bodily dirt, but the promise made to God from a good conscience. It saves you through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 3.20-22).**

The story of Noah and the Flood teaches us two things, says Peter.

**i) God judges**

God, so the story goes, was so appalled by the wickedness of Noah's contemporaries that he caused it to rain for forty days and forty nights.

The upshot was that there was a great flood - and all living beings on the earth - human beings, animals and birds - were destroyed.

Whether or not it was a universal flood or a more localised phenomenon is neither here nor there. The thrust of the story is that those who ignored God were destroyed by the water. The Flood is a story of God's judgment in action.

It is a reminder that when we go our own selfish and sinful way there is always a price to be paid, and that price is death.

For Peter, however, the story of the Flood was not just a story about judgment within the historical process, but rather a picture of judgment to come at the end of time.

In this respect the teaching of the Bible is clear: one day there will be a final reckoning.

There may not be another Flood like that experienced by Noah and his contemporaries, but there will be a time when all of us will have to face up to the consequences of our actions.

The fact is that we live in a moral universe, in which bills have to be paid.

God is no soft spineless character, who hasn't got the guts to challenge us when we sin against his holy laws.

Rather he is a holy and righteous God, a God who is deeply concerned at the fundamental distinction between right and wrong .

Peter as one of the 12 disciples would have often heard Jesus speak of the day when God will call us all to give an account of ourselves

- Jesus spoke of **two ways** open to us - one way which leads to God, and the other way which leads to destruction.
- Jesus spoke of **two groups** to which we may belong: we belong either to the group which he likened to wheat destined for the barn, or to the group which he likened to weeds destined for fire.
- Jesus spoke of **two destinies** which await us: for those inside the Kingdom of God there is a great party to come; but for those outside the Kingdom there will be no partying, but weeping and gnashing of teeth

Of course, Jesus was speaking picture terms - but these pictures as indeed the story of the Flood point to an underlying reality - the reality of judgement to come.

**ii) God saves**

But for Peter the Flood was not just a picture of judgment to come.

It was also a picture of salvation: for not all were lost in the Flood.

There was an ark - and thanks to that ark Noah and his family were saved.

Yes, says Peter, "**The few people in the boat - eight in all - were saved by the water**"

Sadly, we've tended to view the story of the Ark as a piece of music-hall comedy. "*The animals went in two by two, the elephant and the kangaroo*".

But the animals are an irrelevancy. The point is that **eight people were saved** from destruction.

They were saved through their faith in God, faith expressed in building a boat were saved. To their contemporaries their actions seemed foolish in the extreme: 'Fancy building an ark, Mr Noah!' But in the end it was their taking God seriously which resulted in their salvation.

To many people today all this talk about salvation seems foolish in the extreme.

Add to that this morning's baptismal service, it must seem weird beyond.

But in due time all this messing around with water will be vindicated.

For we shall be saved - not by faith expressed in the building of an ark, but by faith expressed in baptism.

This is the point which Peter is trying to make: "**The few people in the boat - eight in all - were saved by the water, which was a symbol pointing to baptism, which now saves you. It is not the washing away of bodily dirt, but the promise made to God from a good conscience. It saves you through the resurrection of Jesus Christ**".

The key words here are "**Baptism...now saves you**".

Immediately we ask: How does baptism save?

### ***1. The water of baptism does not save***

When our youngest son, Benjamin, was born, he swallowed some mucus, and had to be moved into the "special care baby unit".

I remember talking with the senior nurse on the ward when she opened a drawer of her desk and out fell a pile of baptismal cards. '*Why*', I wondered, '*should she have a stock of baptismal cards?*'. At once the answer flashed through my mind. They were there for the babies who were not going to survive.

The nurse kept those baptismal cards for emergencies - she and indeed many others brought up in folk religion believed that baptism saves.

But the mere fact of being sprinkled or being dunked doesn't save. As Peter says: "**The baptism which now saves you**" is "**not the washing away of bodily dirt**".

It is not the physical act of getting wet which saves us.

Baptism doesn't make us clean like a bath after a game of rugger.

There is nothing magic about the water

Baptism points to the difference that Jesus can make – Jesus who as a result of his death on the Cross can cleanse us from the deepest of sin's stains.

Yes, no one is too far gone for Jesus to save.

The water itself, however, does not save - rather our faith in Jesus expressed in baptism..

### ***2. The promise made in baptism saves***

**"Baptism now saves you... the promise [pledge] made to God from a good conscience"**

Peter is using here a technical term used in the ancient world for making a *contract*.

At that time for a contract to be legal and binding there had to be a definite question and a definite answer made in the presence of witnesses. The question was: "*Do you accept the*

terms of this contract and bind yourself to observe them?" If "Yes", then the contract was valid. Without that question and answer the contract was not valid.

The same thought is present here.

For baptism similarly involves a contract between ourselves and God made in the presence of witnesses.

In baptism we make a formal promise or pledge to go the way of Jesus.

In our hall at home we have a framed copy of *the pledge made by Caroline's great-grandfather in 1864*. It reads:

*Penzance Primitive Juvenile Temperance or Band of Hope  
This is to certify that Richard Harris  
is a member of this society having taken the pledge  
"I do voluntarily promise that I will abstain from Ale, Porter, Wine, Ardent Spirits and all  
intoxicating Liquors as beverages, and will not offer them to others"  
Feb 13th 1864*

This morning Beata, Nicki & Secilia will take the pledge - a pledge, however, not to abstain from alcohol, but rather a pledge to follow Jesus.

Today they are publicly nailing their colours to the mast - they are formally committing themselves to Jesus.

I often liken a baptismal service to a marriage service: when the groom and his bride come to make their vows, they are already head over heels in love - their vows make no difference to the intensity of their love - but in the marriage service they are publicly sealing their commitment to one another, 'till death us do part'.

Similarly in their baptism Beata, Nicki & Secilia will be sealing their commitment to Christ, but not 'till death us do part', but rather for eternity.

For nothing will separate them from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.

As we stand in the water I shall ask the following double-question: "*Do you profess repentance toward God and faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord*". To which they must reply, "*I do*"

Without a question and a response of that kind baptism is invalid.

Or to put it another way, it is only when people there is repentance toward God and faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord, that baptism saves.

Let me spell it out a little more: "***Do you profess repentance toward God***":

This old-fashioned language simply means, will you turn from going your way, and will you begin to go God's way, whatever the cost.

Let's face it, it can be costly to be a Christian. Our values are different.

To go the way of Jesus is by and large to go against the stream.

The second part of the question is: "***Do you profess faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord***".

What is faith? Faith is putting our trust in the Lord Jesus.

FAITH in the words of the old Sunday School definition is '*forsaking all I trust him*'.

This is the pledge Beata, Nicki & Secilia will make - a pledge to belong to Jesus and to belong to him alone.

In turn Jesus will keep his side of the bargain. He will save them.

### **3. *The Lord to whom we make our pledge saves***

**"Baptism saves you. It is the promise made to God from a good conscience. It saves you through the resurrection of Jesus Christ**

Peter here reminds us of the ultimate origin of our salvation.

Repentance and faith are necessary, but we are not saved in the first instance by our repentance and our faith, but by Jesus.

Let me give you an illustration. Suppose you, a non-swimmer, were to fall off Southend Pier when the tide was in and I was to throw a lifebelt to you: would you congratulate yourself for having grabbed hold of the life-belt - or would you thank me for having the presence of mind to throw a lifebelt to you?

The answer is obvious.

Likewise, in the first instance we are not saved by our response to the death and resurrection of Jesus, but rather by Jesus who died for us, Jesus who rose for us.

Jesus saves. Jesus on his Cross and in his Resurrection has done everything necessary for our salvation

BUT nonetheless there is one action we must take: we must stretch out our hand and hold onto his hand. Otherwise the outlook is bleak.

Otherwise we are still in our sin - otherwise we are still liable to judgment and to destruction.

This morning Beata, Nicki & Secilia are telling the world that Jesus is their Saviour.

My question is: what about you? Is Jesus your Saviour too?

Has he also lifted you up from the pit, as it were - or have you yet to stretch out your hand and grab his?

Have you yet to make the pledge and repent of your sin and put your faith in him?

Christianity is a rescue religion. Let's make sure that we allow Jesus to rescue us!