

Sermon

Genesis 6: 5-22; 7: 17- 8: 1, 14-22

“When the Lord saw how great was the wickedness of human beings on earth, and how their every thought and inclination were always wicked, he bitterly regretted that he had made mankind on earth. He said, ‘I shall wipe off the face of the earth this human race which I have created – yes, man and beast, creeping things and birds. I regret that I ever made them’.” (6: 5)

That’s a long way from the things I remember about the story of the flood as it was told to me as a child. Yes, information about God’s decision was mentioned but the things that stuck in my mind were the images that came with the story: pairs of animals obediently trotting up the gangplank and into the safety of the ark; ravens and doves sent out from the ark in search of dry land and the dove returning with the olive branch in its mouth; and, of course, the rainbow, the sign of God’s covenant with the earth that “never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all creation.” (9: 15)

The story of Noah and the ark, or at least the image of the ark and the animals, remains a powerful image, even in a society which has cut adrift from knowledge of the text of Bible stories. If you wish, you can buy the children a Playmobil plastic ark, one that comes with a whole host of pairs of animals, though for some reason the dinosaurs are not included.

If you prefer to put up your feet and watch a dvd together then I recommend *Evan Almighty*, an ecological comedy, starring Steve Carrel as a newly elected U.S. congressman, instructed by God, in the guise of a twinkle-eyed Morgan Freeman, to construct an ark in twenty-first century America. Alternatively, if you want to spend some time alone and literature is more your sort of thing, I heartily recommend, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* by Julian Barnes, a collection of short stories which includes a tale humorously re-telling this biblical story from the perspective of a stowaway on the ark.

When we play, watch or read the biblical story in a modern setting we are light-hearted but when we detect resonances in our contemporary world the mood turns much more sombre. Tales of flood seem not so far away from our concerns and controversies concerning global warming, whether in the gradual rise in water levels that might flood the east of England where we live or the catastrophic impact of a tsunami in other parts of the world. Once we start thinking in those terms questions about the role of the Almighty in the earthquakes which have devastated communities around the world in recent months come quickly to our minds even if we are reluctant to voice them with our lips. We might welcome the sight of an Essex sky on a beautiful day that for once is not criss-crossed with the vapour trails of airliners but living under a cloud of volcanic ash that closes our airports is an unsettling experience.

You don't even have to read these chapters as a factual, historical account of something that once occurred to find your self facing some searching questions (though I'm sure that the biblical account reflects at least something of memories and experiences of a major flood or floods in those parts of the ancient world). No, it's not so much the part of the story about the flood that grabs my **adult** attention; I am more concerned about what the story has to say about God and the impact of that on humankind. Two questions arise. Firstly, would God, assisted by us or not, really destroy his own creation, perhaps though something like climate change? Secondly, can it really be true that, even if only on occasion, God changes his mind? The prospect of either of these situations is very unsettling, both to those of us who feel attached to the continuation of the life of the planet, either for ourselves or for those whom we love and also to those who put their hope in a God who stands above the fray, all-powerful and therefore untouched by anything that might deflect the divine purpose.

Our own experience tells us that worlds **can** come to an end. We know that stars die and with them the life that resides on the planets that orbit them. Currently, we worry about the future of our own planet. On a social level we know that nation states not only rise but fall, communities can disintegrate and scatter, personal relationships can irretrievably break down; even churches can come to a complete and utter end – so why not

creation? The biblical promise about seedtime and harvest and all the rest with which we began our worship and which appears here in Genesis comes with a vital qualifying condition, “**As long as the earth lasts,** seedtime and harvest ... will never cease.” (8: 22) So, what if God changes his mind? What if God should say again, “I regret that I ever made them” (6: 7) and decides to bring it all to a swift conclusion?

One might hardly blame God if that was what God chose to do for although we might ask questions about whether God shows evidence of change of heart we can be certain that humankind remains consistent in this story from beginning to end. When at its beginning God resolves to bring destruction this is due to humanity’s wickedness, in thought, inclination and action. When after the cataclysm of the flood humanity emerges once gain upon the land human nature has not changed. God’s promise is based in the expectation that it will be business as usual as far as humankind is concerned: “Never again shall I put the earth under a curse because of mankind, **however evil their inclination may be from their youth upwards**” (8: 21) – I guess we are all included in that one! Indeed, it is not the words of an ancient story that convinces us that humanity has not changed; it is the contemporary stories of press and television; it is our experiences of the things done to us by others and the memories of the things we have done to them that convinces us that this

is true: the humanity that comes out of the ark will be basically the same as the one that went into it.

In a situation where something needs to change and the human part of the equation does not change it becomes good news to discover and declare that **God** changes and then seeks to change humankind. God, so the story goes, is changed by his creation, not, on this occasion, the other way around. And that is a recurring theme in the Old Testament, that the God who is grieved and angered by human sin; the God who is **affected** by that situation, seeks to respond with judgment, but the judgement pronounced becomes one of mercy and reconciliation rather than the originally intended one of death and destruction. And at what point in the story does God change his mind? Where is the evidence that this has taken place? It seems to happen in an instant. God says, “I regret that I ever made them” and the very next words of the story are, “Noah, however, had won the Lord’s favour.” (6: 8) The story of God’s relationship with humankind, with creation, then becomes the story of Noah and his ark.

And that is another profoundly hopeful sign, a hint of something greater yet to come. Part and parcel of God’s change of heart involves the decision to respond to humankind’s situation through a human individual, Noah, who is, as the story puts it, “a righteous man, the one blameless

man of his time, [who] ... walked with God.” (6: 9) On this occasion the one human person, Noah, through his survival and with his family represents a “stay of execution” for humanity. In time to come God will speak through other individuals, prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, Amos and Hosea; all making people aware of God’s concern and involvement with his creation, with his people. All, of course, are hints of things to come, forerunners of one who is to come. Noah is a human being who responds to God’s call, a call made because God is so close to humankind that he is affected, grieved by human sin. Ultimately, Christian faith declares that God is prepared to draw so close to humanity out of love for us that “Christ Jesus ... [who] was in the form of God ... led no claim to equality with God, but made himself nothing, assuming the form of a slave. Bearing the human likeness [like Noah], sharing the human lot [like Noah, **unlike** Noah and even greater than Noah] he humbled himself, and was obedient, even to the point of death, death on a cross.” (Philippians 2: 6, 7)

Faced with the reality of human shortcoming and evil inclinations God responds with judgement, but in an instant that judgment changes from one of death and destruction to one of mercy and reconciliation. Thank God that even if we refuse to change, should it cost us the world itself, God is always prepared to change, to try again out of love for the creation that is his.