

18 February 2024 1st Sunday in Lent

See and Remember

(Mark 1.9-15, Genesis 9.8-17)

The Gospel reading today is very familiar and we spoke about most of it in early January when we celebrated the Baptism of our Lord. We spoke of Jesus' baptism and his being driven into the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan. The last 2 verses of today's reading, however, lead us to consideration of repentance and our personal relationship with God. The last verse concludes with the words we use on Ash Wednesday, *Repent and believe in the good news or Repent and believe in the gospel.*

We can discern even deeper meaning if we also look at the Old Testament reading. This comes just after the story of Noah and the great flood. We need to revisit this story to find the true scale of the great promise in today's reading. Today's reading is from Genesis 9 but if there is someone here with a full Bible, could you look at Genesis 6.6. When you find it, just hold it and we will come back to it.

Reading the story of Noah and the flood in the Bible has much to teach us. It is a bit like listening to a complex piece of music. Every part adds something a bit different, but we need all the parts to discern the whole.

Let's look at a few of the threads that live in our heads. When we retell this story, we often choose to tell a G-rated version, the one that lingers in our heads from childhood. Good people are saved from danger. Even the animals are saved, and there is a visually beautiful rainbow promise that they will never be in that sort of danger again. There are sometimes storybook add-ins that feature things like sparkles in the rainbow and unicorns who missed the boat because they were splashing and playing in the waters. Do you remember the Irish Rovers' *Unicorn Song*? *The waters came down and sort of floated them away and that's why you'll never see a unicorn to this very day.* This G-rated version is one that we only find in children's story books and songs.

Another misleading thread is the M-rated movie version of the story with divine anger, genocide, and environmental destruction. There is just enough of a happy ending to get the reader past the rage and death. This is the stuff of the epic big screen, with heroic survivors and villains trying desperately to get aboard but who get their just deserts. We tend to not put this version in the children's Bible storybooks. Neither of these versions is exactly what the Bible says.

Although we don't have the unicorn story or the vengeful, pitiless God story, there are 2 very different versions of the Noah story in Genesis. When the scriptures were formalised, there was no choosing between these 2 stories. They were both included, so they both matter. They differ in the details, but they are woven together to form one story. One version has 1 pair each of all the animals. The other version has 7 pairs of each of the clean animals and 1 pair of each of the unclean animals. The two versions also differ on how long the flood lasted and which bird was first sent out to find dry land. However, the underlying essentials of the story are the same.

In between the 2 accounts of creation in Genesis 1 and 2, and of the flood in Genesis 6, 7 and 8, there are many stories of humans' inability to live in God's ways and the terrible things that resulted from this. This intervening period ties together the creation and the flood. Our reading today focuses on the rebuilding of relationship, the eternal covenant of commitment and re-commitment. It is, in a way, a new creation story, a re-start.

Unlike the 2 different accounts of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 which are told separately, one after the other, the 2 stories of the flood are intertwined with one another. When I was studying Old Testament at St Mark's, we were given the task of trying to differentiate and separate out the 2 stories of the flood from the combined account. Some parts were clearly different, but others were much more difficult to separate. We did not all come to the same conclusions, and we were not told who was or was not correct.

The learning was to come from engaging in the struggle, whether we succeeded or not. That was an important lesson. It is worth reading the whole account of the flood, both versions, very carefully to seek the mind of God.

In the book of Genesis, we see that sin destroys not only our relationship with God but with one another, with creation and even with the efforts of our own earthly labours. God ultimately seeks to save and preserve, to recall humanity to divine harmony. If we look carefully at the instances of God's seeming rage and anger in the story of Noah, we find a very different picture. We read rage and anger into the story as the emotions we would act upon to destroy the world in this way.

Does someone have Genesis 6:6?

LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. (Genesis 6.6)

It grieved him to his heart. This is a reaction of love, not of hate. In our own lives, when a loved one fails to do the things that would bring them to a full and flourishing life, and turns instead to the opposite actions, we experience deep sorrow. We grieve what happened and what failed to happen. It is out of this sort of grief and sorrow that God acts to enable a fresh start for creation and for humanity.

Theologian Elizabeth Webb tracks this fresh start, this re-creation in the flood story. The separation and gathering of the waters from Genesis 1 (Gen 1:6-11) is undone in the flood of Genesis 6 (Gen 6:11) and then redone and restored after the flood in Genesis 8 (Gen 8:3-14); the creation command to be fruitful and multiply in Genesis 1 (Gen 1:28) is repeated 3 times after the flood in Genesis 8 and 9 (Gen 8:17, 9:1, and 9:7); and the creation assurance in Genesis 1 that humans are created in the image of God (Gen 1:27) is also repeated in Genesis 9 (Gen.9:6b).

You might like to explore the parallels with Jesus' time in the desert and his subsequent preaching of the Gospel that all might have life, abundant life in every way. In our study book, Andy Hamilton speaks of God being with us in

the hard places and that we can remember and treasure these times and places of God's presence.

God's promise of a fresh start is a promise for current and future generations and for all the earth – people, plants, animals, everything. And, lest we forget, we are told to look to the rainbow reminder.

This bow is not a decorative feature of the sky, but an armistice agreement written on a discarded military weapon. Every time we see a rainbow, we should be reminded of God's love, God's promise, and our responsibility to do our part. Every rainbow is like a giant note on the fridge to remind us of what we need to remember, of what we are being trusted to do and to be, and God's promise to safeguard us. In today's reading we hear the *never again* promise 3 times. *Never again, never again, never again.*

You will be very familiar with this verse from the prophet Jeremiah, *For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.* (Jeremiah 29:11) This wonderful familiar passage about hope and a future was not written about Noah and it was not written about us. It was about the nation of Judah in very turbulent times. However, it does speak of the nature of God and the relationship between God and God's people. That gives it meaning and relevance for Noah, for us and for all God's people. As Jesus said, *The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*

Let us pray.

Lord, we thank you for your promises. You give us hope and a future. Be with us as we face the challenges of being your people in this world. Amen.