

Sunday 26 February 2012 – First Sunday in Lent

Readings: Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15

You probably know what it's like when children have been fighting “She started it – no, she did”: And maybe you've asked the question I asked – I'm not interested in who started it - who is going to be the one to stop it?

Today we read from Genesis the end of the story of Noah, a story we know well from children's books and toys . But it is a terrifying story scarcely fit for children – God is so hurt, so grieved by the violence and wickedness of human beings that God decides to undo the work of creation, “to blot out from the earth the human beings I have created, people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air”.¹ And God sends the flood to do that, saving only Noah and his sons and their wives and pairs of every living creature, saved in the ark built by Noah in obedience to God's command.

And we have come in at the end of the story, when the flood is over and all the families - human and animal and insect and bird – have left the ark. God has blessed Noah and his sons and has charged them again with the task God gave to human beings at the creation - “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth”.

But what about the original situation? Has God solved the problem of violence and wickedness?

Well, no.

Nothing much has changed on the human side. Violence and wickedness will happen again.

So what will God do when that happens? How will God respond the next time? Will God again bring about the destruction of almost all life on earth?

Clearly, this is a quarrel that human beings have started – but who is going to be the one to stop it?

And then God says “I'll stop it”.

God chooses to do something different, something creative. God decide to act in a way that will break the cycle of destruction. God establishes a covenant, an everlasting covenant, with all of creation – not just humans, but birds, domestic animals, every animal on earth – every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth. God promises that never again, *never again*, **never again** shall a flood destroy all flesh.

What we heard in the reading was all God. Did you notice?

Immediately before these verses, God had addressed Noah and his sons, blessing them, setting out instruction for how to live in this new world, newly re-created. “Be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth”

But now God turns to God's own situation – what will God do now? How will God relate to this new re-creation?

“As for me, I will establish my covenant”.

This is God's doing, something God does unilaterally, off his own bat, without conditions or requirements or escape clauses.

“Never again will a flood destroy all flesh on the earth”.

We're going to hear more about covenants as we journey through Lent. Covenants provide a particular framework of faithful commitment for a relationship. And God often uses covenants to define the relationship God wants to have with the people God has called and chosen.

But this covenant seems different – because this covenant is one-sided. This is the covenant God establishes with the whole creation – and that's it. No response required to activate this covenant. God is establishing it: it's done.

As a sign, as a reminder God sets the rainbow in the sky. Not, did you notice, as a sign for us who look up after a storm and see it arching across the dark sky – no, this is a sign for God, so that God will see it and remember this everlasting covenant that God has chosen to make with every living creature on the earth. The bow is an archery bow, a weapon of war, now set aside, decommissioned, hung up in the sky, and

1 Genesis 6:7

pointed not towards violent and wicked humanity, but pointing towards God, as a sign, a reminder, a knot-in-the-handkerchief, for God.

Does God need reminding? Might God forget? Can God place limits on what God can do - never again to allow the creation to be destroyed? In this covenant God binds God's own self to humanity and to all creation in a new and different way, in this new re-creation. Now God will relate to the world not only as creator but also as protector, protector even from the destructive consequences of the wickedness and violence that continue to be the human way. God refuses to bring destruction again ever on humanity or on the world. God is committed to finding another way of bringing all creation together in the full shalom of God's own purpose for all things.

The rainbow arcs across the history of Israel, a story marked by violence and wickedness and destruction. At times it must have seemed as though God had surely forgotten this promise. And yet after storms, against the rain clouds, as the sun broke through, the rainbow would be seen – a reminder that God had said - “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and with all flesh on the earth”.

And in the fullness of time, a man came from Nazareth, and was baptised by John in the Jordan. And in this man people came to see that God was continuing to affirm the covenant that God had made with the whole creation – in Jesus Christ God was reconciling the whole world to God's self; when anyone is in Christ there is (again) a new creation.²



And at Jesus' baptism, God's voice is heard: “You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.”

God's commitment to the whole creation comes down to a new focus as Jesus comes from Nazareth and is baptised in the Jordan by John.

Watch as Jesus re-enacts the history of Israel.

Jesus goes into the water – can you hear the echo of Noah's experience, riding out the flood waters for months in the ark. Can you hear the echo of the Exodus, as the people of Israel passed through the Red Sea on dry land?

Jesus' identity is reaffirmed - “You are my son, the beloved; on you my favour rests”. Words drawn from Psalm 2, identifying the one whom God has chosen and anointed and through who God will work; Words drawn from Isaiah 42, speaking of the servant, chosen and anointed by God to do God's work among all peoples

The Spirit drives Jesus out into the wilderness – in fact, throw him out into the wilderness. For forty days. Listen to the echoes: - the rain fell for forty days.- the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years, being challenged and shaped and taught by God so that they could become the people of God.

In Jesus the sign of the rainbow, God's commitment to the world and all that is in it comes into its sharpest focus. The commitment God made at creation and renewed in eternal covenant after the flood, a commitment to sustain all life on earth, to protect it and to bring it to fulfilment - the final cost of that commitment we will see in Jesus' life and death and resurrection.

We have started a journey this week, you know. Christmas is well behind us – Epiphany, the season of revelation, of the light of God breaking in on this world, is now over.

Now, as summer slips over towards autumn and days begin to draw in, we are once more on the road that leads to Jerusalem. But we begin here, with God's unequivocal covenant and Jesus' experience of baptism and wilderness.

God who declared “Never again will a flood destroy all life” now says to Jesus “You are my beloved – I am well pleased.”

And God's commitment doesn't stop there.

As Tom Wright says:

The whole Christian gospel could be summed up in this point: that when the living God looks at us, at every baptised and believing Christian, God says to us what God said to Jesus on that day. God sees us, not as we are in ourselves, but as we are in Jesus Christ. God looks at us and says “You are my dear, dear child: I'm delighted with you.” That is what God has said to you, each one of you, at your baptism and every day since.³

As we begin this year's journey towards Easter, look up and see the rainbow, and remember the eternal covenant that God has made with God's creation.

As we begin this year's journey towards Easter, listen to God's word to you - “you are my own dear child: I am well pleased with you”.

This week, as you begin on the journey towards Easter, remember that you are surrounded by promise and look for signs of it in the world around you.

3 NT Wright *Mark for Everyone*, pp.4-5