

Bennochy church: 18th February 2018

We could have a debate how 'natural', natural disasters actually are. Are they caused by something inherent in creation itself or are they "man made". In other words, if they are naturally an inbuilt part of creation, it would not matter what we did, these events would still happen. I suspect the truth lies somewhere in the middle. Volcanic plates that causes earthquakes and tsunamis have always happened and always will. Parts of the world are physically unstable. But drilling into the world most remote corners and finding plastics, has not. There are certainly things we need to take responsibility for. I raise this, not to debate the issues of climate change, but to introduce a story. This story is couched, not in terms of a natural disaster, but one brought upon the world, directly by the hand of God. In the language of the ancient world, what God had made was no longer seen as good. It is full of violence and corruption and required to be cleansed.

Now, just stop and think about what I have just said. This is strong hard hitting language. First of all, set aside all those 'nice' stories that we know about animals entering arks, two by two, and rainbows in the sky. This is a story, about genocide, and the writer wants us to believe, this is the work of God, and, to help us understand, Gods actions in destroying the whole of mankind. This is what is happening here.

The world has always been a violent place. In our 24 hour, 7 day a week media world, we know of the violence and abuse, taking place in countries and cities around the world. We are bombarded with these images. How often do we hear this phrase, *"You might find some of the images in this new report disturbing"*. We are hearing that phrase, more and more.

If this flood, was a single act by God to cleanse the violence of humankind, can I say, it did not work. That should not surprise us, because what is written here, this disaster, did not, and could not have, in any way, changed human nature. Just not possible!

Let's talk about justice for a moment. This story is about big picture thinking. It is beyond the family of Noah. God is not here concerned about the individual. The perspective is about human kind and how as a people they have acted. It is not about innocent and guilty. It is about theology. It is about how the writer understands the broken relationship between God and his creation, and how that relationship can be renewed.

Do we understand God acting in such a way. I suspect not. So what is going on here? What we don't want to do, is to look for history. Did this flood happen? A limited flood in the then known world may well have happened, and might have felt like the end of the world. However in reality, this story is taken from a common fund of ancient writings that already existed about a flood, and is here used by the biblical writer to teach

people about God. By the time this story was written, it had lost all contact with what we call history.

In the mind of the writer, the event had to be of such a magnitude, that it ultimately created a new covenant with God. A disaster large enough, to create a break in history. A kind of 'reset button' in humankind's relationship with God. That is the point of the flood and which leads to the rainbow, as a visible sign of God's promise. We need to take the story as a whole and focus on any of the stories inconsistencies. It is not history.

This disaster had to be worth it. It had to mean something. Afterwards, God says, you know what. I will not do this again. In the mind of the writer, it was that big! This is the beginning of God's covenant with his people and leads into the story of Abraham. And that covenantal relationship builds throughout the whole of the Old Testament.

We don't want to over spiritualise this story, and read into it what is just not there. But can we say, that from the very beginning of history, we stand under the 'judgement' of God. I have deliberately put the word 'judgement' in inverted commas. It is a judgement of grace. If the flood story is one such symbol of that judgement. Then the rainbow speaks of God's grace, that given which is not deserved. God says, there are better times ahead.

Where do we fit into such an ancient story? We have no connection with the world of this writer and how they understood God. Yet, there is something in the act of baptism that takes us back to a flooded world. There is a common theology here, of entering the water.

We know that Jesus was baptised in the waters of the river Jordan. In a sense it began his public ministry and may have been a point of recognition, of who he was. *"This is my dear son."* The waters of Baptism, like the flood story, is an act of God. To be understood only by faith, not as an act of history. Baptism is a spiritual marker in the sand. A moment in our lives, between the 'flooded' old and 'rainbow' new. In baptism, we to, enter into a covenant with God and claim his promises.

We join with the ancient writer of the flood, in looking at God's rainbow in the sky, and still we know, that his promise is eternal, and his love greater than our failures. Amen.