

Genesis 6: 9-22, 7: 24, 8: 14-19

Psalm 46

Romans 1: 16-17, 3: 22b-28

Matthew 7: k21 - 29

Noah and newness of life: the power of one

Flood stories appear in many mythologies of the world, possibly because of ancient, universal human experiences resulting from the effect of climate change. As global warming continues and the news reports rapidly melting glaciers, shifting ice-caps, and predictions of dramatic rises in sea levels, we may feel ourselves to be not very far from Noah's world. And the greatest Tsunami in living memory has brought us face to face with the terror of our fragility in the face of natural forces. But flood stories are symbolic, whatever their place in real history may be. And while we should not assume they all have the same meaning, they have often been used to signify cleansing, through a return to the primal water, and a re-emergence into new life. Floods are like gigantic, collective baptisms which purify and regenerate, not by the power of human consciousness, but by the strength of another, saving power.

The story of Noah is one of the best known and most popular in our tradition. Pictures of it appear on wall hangings in kindergartens. And it has been sent up by comedians like Bill Cosby. This is not a child's story.

Part of the context for the story of Noah is last week's reading of the creation from Genesis 1. As we know, Genesis 1 is not a statement of how the world came to be, but a declaration of where all of creation stands in relation to the source of life. Genesis 1 declares the world belongs to God: nothing here is self-made. It has its origin in the heart and purpose of God who values it as good, and seeks to use it as a vehicle for blessing. A covenantal relationship between the Creator and the created, directed towards unity, fruitfulness and goodness is intended. "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it" is a declaration that what God values, humans are also intended to value and care for. But something went wrong: humans willed to live in their own way: creation refused to be God's creation, and an essential fracture appeared in all relationships.

As we heard in the first reading, the world's betrayal of the good intentions of God pained the heart of the Creator. Having exchanged the truth about God for a lie, the world brought a living death upon itself. It became a place of evil, corruption and violence. The Noah story is rather like a harsh prophetic speech, which announces God's intention to renew the world. We hear this as destructive, but the plan comes from the pathos of God who grieves that things have gone so far astray. There is only one person who does not fit the indictment. Noah is the living hope, the bearer of a new possibility for life. He is the fully responsive person who accepts his place in the scheme of creation. He lets God be God. Despite the evil of the days and the impending flood, a new humanity can emerge because of Noah's continuing willingness to refuse the spirit of the time and live in the ways of God. This means something, not only for humanity but, as the graphic suggests, it means something for - cows and birds and dogs - the whole of creation.

From the beginning of Genesis until now no model of faith has appeared. This seems gloomy, but on the other hand we should see that, even in the world as it was in the days of Noah, faithfulness is still possible. Evil, corruption and violence do not eliminate the option of faith or cancel the possibility that one life might be the bearer of life and light for the world. The power of one: it is as small as it can get, but the difference is dramatic. Hope for the future is born. God is willing to continue a covenant relationship with the people of earth through the faithful one. It is a fragile basis, but it means there will be life.

In 1955 a big flood engulfed our farm and our neighbours, who lived on lower ground, fled to be with us on the hill where we lived. But there are floods and there are floods. The question raised by the story of Noah is - Can the world collapse? Can everything we have worked for be swept away? The answer to such a dreaded thought is that we know it can! Ask Schapelle Corby this question. Survey the lands struck by the Tsunami. Talk to someone whose family has broken up, or whose partner has been diagnosed with a virulent, terminal condition. Pay a visit to Baghdad or speak to a family who has suffered deep tragedy. Near at hand lies the fear of devastating chaos, a flood in which all we care for might so easily be lost. The disturbing suggestion of the Noah story is that even under God's rule such things can happen. We know this is true.

Popular reading of the Noah story suggests that the flood was a crisis brought about to place the world in jeopardy. Walter Brueggemann suggests that a close reading of the text shows that the crisis occurs in the heart and of God, who identifies with the travail of the created order. It is not the water that is destructive or painful to God. It is the continuous flood of willful resistance on the part of humankind that places the world in jeopardy. From the beginning God's authority and power was not coercive. From the outset God willed that creation be turned towards Godly purposes, but never commandeered it to do so. From the first humans preferred their own way, and now, out of grief, God seeks a means by which to renew the earth. The flood ends and life begins again, thanks to the will of God, and the faithfulness of Noah.

The faithfulness of Noah is the connection between this story and the Gospel. Those who build their lives on firm and lasting foundations are those who take to heart, and seek to live in, the ways of God. This does not mean learning all the religious language just to be able to use the right words. Nor does it mean appreciating sermons while never allowing them to make a difference to the focus of our life. It means entering ever more deeply into the relationship that this symbolic context points to; living by the grace that it offers, and the imperative this implies. This may not make any difference to how prone we are to getting cancer, or losing our money, but it may make a difference to the way we weather the storm. It may make a difference because we know that our life is held in a context that is deeper than the greatest deluge the world can deliver. That God sought to make a covenant with Noah means that the life of which we speak here is founded on concern for us - that feels for our loss, and is ever seeking, through word and Spirit, to lead us again to find the way to life. Thanks be to God.