

15.2.2017 St John with St Mark, Bury
Genesis 8:6-13, 20-22. Mark 8:22-26.

I used to take groups of primary school children on tour of St Thomas's church. And I fell into the habit of talking about Noah. If you look at the ceiling of the church, it looks a bit like an upside-down boat. So I would talk about the ark of salvation and that would lead into Noah. And a forest of hands would go up to tell the tale. And Noah's story is a story worth telling. It has all the best elements in making a good mystery tale about God.

There is judgement. All flesh is brought under judgement. Including Noah. How else would we know that he is righteous unless he has been judged and found to be the one righteous man out of all of them. But even Noah will fall. For after the flood has gone Noah gets drunk. And his naked shame is seen by his sons, especially Canaan, who is cursed to be a slave to his brothers. That is part of the story we never hear, and never want to hear.

God does the judging. God has seen that all flesh, and especially humanity, sins from birth. God wants a perfect world so he destroys the world he has fashioned. However, Noah is righteous, so Noah and his family are saved. Noah builds an ark with three decks and a door. When the flood comes God will close the door on Noah and the animals. Now, why three decks? There are three decks because there are three levels to Creation: the heavens, the ground and the sea. The ark is a mini-version of Creation. God may be killing Creation as a whole, but God is also saving Creation, for the Creation is ultimately good.

But in the depths of destruction, God has a change of heart. When the floods go, abate, God says that he will never again destroy all flesh, even though their inclinations may be evil from their youth upwards. 'While the earth lasts seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall never cease'. The earth as we know it is imperishable and blessed by God. There is no perfect world; the Creation we have is marked by sin and redemption.

I don't know if you remember Apollo 8. That was the first mission that took astronauts around the moon. They sent back amazing pictures of the Earth. The world we live in was seen to be blue and white, an ever so fragile ark suspended in the darkness of space. Many people commented on the ark-like qualities of the Earth, and the astronauts read out the story of Creation from Genesis.

We are actually facing a crisis over the weather patterns of the northern hemisphere. That's us. The ice at the North Pole and arctic is melting faster than predicted. The loss of the ice could well mean a radical change in the weather patterns affecting us. Unless we act and act now we could be destroying the planet. Noah's story is optimistic, but also realistic. Even Noah does something that is unrighteous; he gets drunk. Our use of carbon-based fuels is building up, has built up a legacy that could cause us great harm. Last year, the major polluters agreed to cut emissions and work towards a measurable increase in temperature. The polluters included the USA and China. Now President Trump is saying that he may not sign this treaty into law; he does not believe that there is global warming. This could be disastrous.

We are called to nurture this world so that all may live well. We should remember that life may be destroyed. We should remember that the righteous may be saved for their great task of salvation. Amen.

A reading from the book of Genesis

At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent out the raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him. He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark; and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days, and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him any more.

In the six hundred and first year, in the first month, on the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from the earth; and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the face of the ground was drying.

Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt-offerings on the altar. And when the Lord smelt the pleasing odour, the Lord said in his heart, 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. As long as the earth endures,
seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,
summer and winter, day and night,
shall not cease.'

This is the word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

A reading from the Gospel of Mark

They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, 'Can you see anything?' And the man looked up and said, 'I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.' Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Then he sent him away to his home, saying, 'Do not even go into the village.'