

Genesis 6:9-22; 7:24; 8:14-9:1

Last week in our service we went right back to the beginning of the Bible and we read the story of creation in Genesis chapter 1. This week we continue in the Book of Genesis: in fact we're going to do a bit of a whistle-stop tour of the first 11 chapters, and follow some threads that run through them.

Our starting point, however, is the story of the flood. It always strikes me as curious that this is one Bible story that is often told to children and there are lots of children's story books that include it, no doubt because it has animals in it, and an ark, and a colourful rainbow and all that appeals to children. The problem is that the story is what is sometimes called a 'text of terror', a story of unimaginable death and destruction being visited upon the world, surely one of the last Bible stories that we should introduce to children. Yet it's an important story for, as with so much of the opening chapters of Genesis, it reveals deep truths about God, about us and about the world.

So let's plunge in, if you'll pardon the pun, and we find that the world that God created in Genesis 1 and that we read about last week has changed. In Genesis 1 God repeatedly describes the world he has created as 'good', but here it is no longer good, for we read now that 'the earth was filled with violence.' Here is one feature of life under human dominion: violence, for we are a violent people, infected by violence, and we inflict violence upon the earth and upon our fellow creatures and upon one another. And God is grieved. God is pierced to the heart to see his good creation violated.

There is, however, another word that features in these verses which describes the effect of this violence. It's the word 'corrupt' and it's repeated: 'Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight... and God saw that the earth was corrupt for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth.' And this is an important word for, you see, violence corrupts in the sense that it corrodes, it decays, it eats away until the world of Noah suffers the fate of anything that is corroded and decayed – it collapses. And with the collapse of the world comes chaos and the waters roar and foam, as we read earlier in Psalm 46.

Then, however, there comes something new. The flood abates and Noah and his family gaze out upon a new creation, fresh and full of possibility. It's a little like Genesis 1, the first creation: the watery deep has been subdued and a new world emerges and there is another similarity. And in Genesis 1, you may recall, God issues a command to his creation, first to the animals: 'be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas and let birds multiply on the earth.' And God repeats that command a few verses later to the human beings he has created in his image. We read that God blessed them and said, 'Be fruitful and fill the earth...' Now, in this story of the flood, as the waters subside and the new world dawns, that phrase reappears as our reading ends with the words, 'God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth...' And just in case Noah and his sons weren't paying attention he repeats it a few verses further on: 'and you, be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth and multiply in it.' Clearly, being fruitful and multiplying and abounding is very important to God: it is a mandate for creation in Genesis 1 and it is reinforced once again in this new creation that emerges from the waters of the flood. Only this command to be fruitful and to multiply and to abound must be understood as a warrant for diversity, for variety. What we are dealing with there is not just multiplying numerically – lots and lots and more and more of the same. This is the multiplication of diversity, of endless variety and difference and variation.

This theme of diversity runs through these early chapters of Genesis. We find it reflected in Genesis 1 where the writer seems to take delight in the phrase, 'of every kind...' Check it out: when Genesis 1 describes the creation of plants and birds and sea creatures and cattle and beasts the phrase 'of every kind' repeats and repeats, at least nine times in the chapter. And when the creation of human beings in God's image is described, there is diversity as humans are created male and female. And when in today's text God resolves to flood creation and to remake it we again hear echoes of Genesis 1 when Noah is commanded to bring into the ark 'two of every kind' of every

living thing, of the birds ‘according to their kinds’, and of the animals ‘according to their kinds’ and of every creeping thing ‘according to their kinds’, and Noah is even told too to take into the ark ‘every kind of food...’

Are you getting the message? These early chapters of Genesis are peppered with the words ‘of every kind’. God loves diversity. Sin involves sameness, boring repetition! And when the flood is over, and dry land appears, God makes a covenant with the earth, a promise never again to wipe it out. And as a sign and reminder of the promise he takes - what? The rainbow, the multicoloured rainbow, a symbol of diversity!

Well, sadly, if we read on beyond the flood story we come to a story about a group of people who came together to build a city with a tower reaching up to heaven. And that story begins with the words, ‘Now the whole earth had one language and the same words’. What? What a dismal place! Here is a failure of diversity. Sameness has crept in: one language, same words! These people are seeking security in sameness. And by the end of the story God has been provoked into confusing the languages of all the earth, scattering the people in variety and diversity.

The flood story, then, tells of the violence that corrupts and collapses the world, and that grieves God and prompts him to begin again. But the evidence of the early chapters of Genesis is that it is not just violence that grieves God, but also a monochrome world of uniformity and monotony. Violence on the one hand, sameness on the other: these go against the very grain of creation. And when devotion to violence and sameness come together, when they conspire together, what do we have? Well, we have what has been so graphically brought to our attention in recent days. We have the ugly sin of racism. We have the image of a white police officer with his knee on the neck of a black man and squeezing the breath out of him: a terrible convergence of violence and resistance to God-given diversity.

Now, it is vital for us as Christians to understand all this. These early chapters of Genesis take us deep into the world we live in, delving down into human nature and the ways in which we deface the glory of God’s creation. In these narratives we see our captivity to violence, and the ways in which it is legitimated, and we discern the lure, the seduction of sameness. And as we read on in the Bible we find the story of empires – of Egypt and Babylon and the rest – and of course we do, because the history of the world is the story of empire. And empire is about violence and sameness. It is about one rule and one culture over others and the demotion and suppression of difference and diversity. And as in the days of Egypt and Pharaoh, empire often leaves the bitter legacy of slavery in its wake, and statues to people who represent that legacy. But of course the good news is that the Bible does not end with empire. The Bible ends with Kingdom, with the realm of God ruled by Jesus who is Lord. And if our focus today has been on Genesis, the beginning of the bible, it must end with Revelation, the last book in the Bible, and this glorious picture: ‘after this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne...’ Here is the fulfilment, in God’s kingdom, of the divine mandate for creation: ‘be fruitful and multiply’, a glorious display of the diversity ‘of every kind’.

So where, then, does that leave us as the church? What is our calling as the people of God in the face of violence and racism? Well, very briefly, three things: firstly, the vocation of the church is to confess the sins of the world, to recognise that we are part of a violent world that is often threatened by difference and to acknowledge all the ways we collude with it. The early chapters of Genesis are about us, all of us. And we are called not just to denounce but to confess. This is the priestly calling of the church: to be the place where the sins of the world are confessed and brought out into the light so that they can be born away by the grace and mercy of God. But, secondly, we are to be people who recognise that to bear the divine image means to discover ourselves in encounter with the other, be it the male or the female or the person of a different tribe or tongue or colour, or whatever. I cannot be me without the encounter with the other, with difference. Life in God’s realm is a celebration of diversity, ‘of every kind’ and to be fully human my life and yours must reflect that. That may take me outside my comfort zones, but the alternative is to be a one dimensional human being. And, thirdly, we as Christ’s church are called to be the peaceable

community: the peaceable community where violence is renounced, where forgiveness is extended, and where 'there is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.' This does not mean that differences are extinguished and all the colours bleed into one – far from it. Here diversity is celebrated, but we discover in Christ a rich unity.

The flood story is not a children's story. It is a story of violence and the corruption and collapse of the world. But out of it emerges a new world. May God help us to be heralds of God's realm where diversity is celebrated, violence is renounced and we discover our unity in the Lord Jesus Christ. amen.

O holy and gracious God,  
 eternal Creator and Lord of all,  
 we praise you for this new day, for this new week;  
 we rejoice that once again you have brought  
 day out of night and light out of darkness.  
 We praise you that you keep faith with your world,  
 even a world which has gone wrong and that  
 falls far short of your will and purpose for it.  
 And God, you have made us for yourself,  
 That we may enjoy you as you find joy in us;  
 but you have also made us for one another,  
 that we might flourish in relationship with  
 our neighbours and with our fellow creatures.  
 O God, forgive us that we corrupt  
 your good world with our violence,  
 forgive us for our hostility to one another,  
 especially those from whom we differ.  
 Forgive us for our seeking of security  
 in those who are like us;  
 forgive us for the narrowness of our horizons  
 when creation is so broad and diverse.

O Lord, have mercy upon us and forgive us for our sins.  
 Reassure us of your grace and faithfulness;  
 remake us and renew us in your image,  
 and bring to birth your kingdom of peace, justice and joy.  
 We pray in Jesus name,  
 and in his words we pray together, saying...