

1st Reading:

**'God saw that the world was corrupt and full of violence,
and God said to Noah, 'I am going to bring the whole human
race to an end.'** Genesis 6: 11

DID IT HAPPEN

Before we can think about Noah, we perhaps should ask whether Noah and the Ark actually happened.

Was there ever a boat, an ark which could take eight adults and two of every creature on earth?

Could eight adults, one of whom was a man aged 600, look after two of every animal, every snake, every bird, every insect for forty days?

What would prevent the lion from eating the lamb?

What would stop the elephant from crushing a snake to death?

Where would food be stored for forty days?

What would the toilet accommodation be like?

When you ask all these questions, it seems an impossible story.

And that – at least to me – is all right...it is impossible.. that is the kind of story is. You see, there are two kinds of stories in the Bible....

TRUTH AND TRUE STORIES

There are true stories
and there are truth stories.

True stories... are historical events, and real people whose lives have been recorded first in memories and then in books -

Moses leading Hebrew slaves to freedom

Esther saving her race from genocide

Jesus being almost killed when he preached in Nazareth

Paul being shipwrecked on the island of Malta.

These are **true** stories. But **truth** stories.....they are are different.

They are stories which might MIGHT have some basis in history, but mostly they are made up to explain what God and human beings are like.

JESUS AND GENESIS

Jesus was very good at Truth stories... he made some of them up.

We don't know if the Good Samaritan really lived.

We don't know if there was a 'real' prodigal son.

We can almost be sure that there was never a king who invited beggars to his banquet.

Jesus used these stories.. which we call parables... to tell us the truth about what God was like and about what we are like.

And right at the beginning of the Bible...we have a number of similar truth stories: The story of Adam and Eve

 The story of the Tower of Babel

 The story of Noah and the Flood.

So what truths does this story tell?

I am going to pick only three... there are many, many more.

THREE TRUTHS

1 GOD IS NOT NEUTRAL

And the first is that when God sees a world which is corrupt and full of violence, God is not neutral.

Genesis 1 – A good world

The Bible begins with the great hymn of creation... a song with seven verses about the different stages in which the earth was called into being. And during the song, we hear the words...'God saw that it was good.'

Right at the end of the song, on the seventh day when God looks at the world, God says 'It was very good'

And then we learn that God tells human beings to take care of the world

which God made and loves, to keep some basic rules... of which the main one is ' **Don't ever think that you are God, because you don't know what is right or wrong, you have to learn it.**'

Adam/Eve & Babel

But the story about Adam and Eve and the story of the Tower of Babel is about people deciding they can forget about God...indeed they can try to be in control like God.. and it leads to disaster.

When the world is full of corruption and violence, when people are fooled by fake news and false truth and deceptive leaders, when people decide to kill others in war, or to let others die because of disease or starvation which doesn't affect them, God is not neutral.

Painters/ Composers

Can you imagine what Rembrandt or Van Gogh would have felt like if they saw all their work, all their best paintings, being flung on a fire and burned by people who didn't like good art?

Can you imagine what Tchaikowsky or Bartok would have felt like if they saw someone physically destroying the manuscript on which they had been inspired to write a stunning concerto?.

Would they be neutral?.. No

Nor is God neutral with what he has made in love becomes the victim of hate.

So God decides to get rid of the organisms which are threatening the life of the planet. But God still loves the world, and by saving Noah there is the prospect of beginning again.

That's the first truth.

And the second, is a little easier to grasp:

2 GOD LOVES DIVERSITY ... variety... contrast

Genesis 1 -good

In the first chapter of Genesis, when God is making the world, God creates at least two things every day.

There is light... and there is darkness (both good)

There is water above the earth in the clouds,
Land beneath the sky
and seas and oceans that surround the earth,

There are trees that bear fruit and trees that bare seed.

There are any number of plants and flowers

There is nor just one type of animal, there are thousands, millions.

God doesn't just make man, God make woman also and they are both
equally made in God's image although they are different.

Babel

And in the story of the Tower of Babel we discover that the reason
that people are scattered all over the earth, is because at Babel they
all tried to be the same – one culture, one project and only one
language.... and God is nor a God of monotomy

not a monolingual God
not a monochrome God.

God loves variety, so he is not just going to let Noah sail away with
his family, he wants the diverity of the animal world to be preserved.

People visit zoos not to see the same kind of creature – but to marvel at
the great diversity – the size, the shape, the abilities, the look of different
animals.... just as people go into gardens not to see just roses, but roses and
petunias and chrysanthamums and gladioli.

It is the great variety which makes enjoyment.

And variety – of plants, of animals, of people is what God wants to be
preserved.

So.... God is not neutral in the face of corruption and violence
God loves variety.

And for the third truth, we have to hear a little more of the story...this
is what happens when after a long time on the water, the ark rests on
dry land, and people and the animals can begin to move again through
the earth.

.....
Genesis 8 v 14-19 and 9 : 8-16
.....

3. GOD MAKES A COVENANT

When Noah and his family are rehabilitated on the physical earth and the floating zoo is empty of animals who have gone their own way all over the earth, God makes a covenant.

This is the first of a number of covenants God will make. We find others in the historical stories:

Most famously, God makes a covenant with Moses that as long as the Hebrew people follow the law delivered to Moses, God will be their protector (Ex. 34:27) But this covenant which is made with Noah is very different.

The covenant with Moses is dependent on the the people keeping God's commandments. But this covenant comes with no such requirement. It is a promise of God which does not require anything in return.

Secondly, the covenant God makes with Moses concerned only the Hebrew people but the covenant with Noah is a promise which God makes not just to one nation but to all nations, and not just to human beings, but to the earth and all its creatures:

Here are the terms:

**I shall keep this covenant with you:
Never again will ll living creatures be destroyed by the waters of
a flood.**

This is a promise not just to human beings but to lions and tigers and bees and buffaloes. This might seem rather illogical. Animals do not have language or intelligence as human beings do? Why include them in the covenant?

Well, there is a very good reason....it is what in recent years we have become more and more aware of, namely that the our human lives and the life of the whole planet depends on a healthy animal population.

We have been concerned recently in Britain with the diminishing number of bees.... not just because we like honey, but because for plants to pollenate they need bees – and butterflies and other insects to go from one plant to

another.

I had always thought that bees were interested in garden flowers, but when this year in my small garden I planted potatoes and peas, the bees were as interested in their flowers as they were in the roses and gladioli.

Up till the industrial revolution, people needed horses in one country, elephants in another, oxen in another to transport good and pull ploughs.

All over the world people need dogs to protect their property. Ot they might also -like a whisky distiller in Scotland - use geese as watchdogs.

Fish in rivers are a sign that the water is healthy, but when fish either disappear completely, or are caught with unusual cancers, it is a clear sign that something is wrong, something is polluting the rivers or the seas.

And if you live alone – if you have to self-isolate, as in the current Covid 19 crisis, it might be a pet which helps you to keep your sanity.

On the animal kingdom, the wellbeing of the plants in the ground and the humans who walk on the earth depends.

And we know.. we all know... that this great variety of plant and animal life is under threat in a way which has never happened before.\

I could give statistics.. there are plenty of them. But I want to call what **Elizabeth Maruma Mrema** from Kenya said at the beginning of this year. She is in charge of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity.

She knows how since her childhood near Mount Kilimanjaro there has been rapid ecological damage in her homeland. In an interview given in January she quoted how scientists were warning that nature is disappearing at a rate ten to huindreds of times highter than the average for the last 10 millions years.

Not long after at the Davos World Economic Forum, the holders of the world's wealth were warned that the loss of biodiversity was the third biggesr risk to the world after infectious diseases and inter-state violence.

THE NEVER AGAIN CONVENANT

\ God makes a covenant to indicate that NEVER AGAIN by God's will shall the biodiveristy of earth be thtreatened.

And just as with a legal agreement, people making it give their signature,

or their mark, God also makes a mark....God puts a rainbow in the sky.

The rainbow is not a sign of Gay Liberation or New Age Spirituality, the rainbow is a sign of God's promise. It is significant in two ways.

First of all it's a rainbow, not a grey bow. The God who loved diversity reflects this in a multicoloured sign, high above the earth.

But secondly in Hebrew the word for rainbow is the same as the word for a bow of war. God – in the face of all life on earth throws up into the sky his weapon of mass destruction. Never again will God willingly destroy the world.

This sign will be as visible to smallest bird as to the tallest human. It is a pledge, a promise, a covenant to all of human life.

God, in this story, in making a covenant promises never to destroy the earth again.

Are we willing to be like God?

Are we willing to love the world so much that neither by our intention or indifference will we be neutral regarding pollution, the destruction of forests, coral reefs and natural habits.

Are we willing to love the world so much that neither by our intention or indifference will the health, the integrity, the beauty, the variety of the earth be endangered?

The story of Noah and the Flood is not just for children at bedtime. It is primarily for adults to whom God has given the guardianship of the world he made and loves.

If, in all of this, you have not heard me mention the name of Jesus much, it is not because Jesus has no interest in the life of the world. It is precisely because he understands the importance of the natural world that so many of his truth stories have to do with crops and food.

It is precisely because he understands the natural world that he says to those of us who are obsessed with what only humans can do:

Consider, think of, appreciate
the flowers of the field
and the birds in the sky.