

Beloved

Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15

A week on from Valentine's Day. No. Me neither. Mind you, I can't begin to imagine my consternation if I had received a card!

Isn't it interesting, each year, how so many people are moved by the 14th of February to do something that will betoken their love. Cards. Flowers. Chocolates. A magazine listed some of the worst gifts to be given on Valentine's Day: tickets that are clearly intended for the giver of the gift; gym membership; hair remover; wrinkle and anti-aging creams. Not exactly the tokens of love to keep the flames of passion kindled.

Our Old Testament reading has one of the most wonderful tokens of love every created. The rainbow. The image of the rainbow was used by South Africa as it emerged from apartheid – the rainbow people. It has been used by the LGBT+ community for many years as a symbol of hope. Last year the rainbow became associated with the NHS, again as a symbol that when the clouds are darkest, light shines on, and hope will come, even through the rain.

When he was 19 years old, everything looked golden for Glasgow-born George Matheson, who lived from 1842 to 1906. A brilliant student, he graduate with honours and was engaged to the love of his life. But then he rapidly began to lose his sight. The doctors said there was no cure. Turning for comfort to his sweetheart to his sweetheart, he was stunned when she fled. She couldn't be the wife of a blind man, she said. Twenty years later, still heart-sore, the blind preacher, alone in his manse, succumbed to real depression. That's when he composed the hymn, 'O love that wilt not let me go'. The third verse runs:

O Joy that seekest me through pain,

I cannot close my heart to Thee:

I trace the rainbow through the rain,

And feel the promise is not vain,

That morn shall tearless be.

The rainbow, shining brightest when the darkest clouds are behind it. It is a promise, a promise by God, that 'never again', repeated several times, will God either destroy the earth or abandon it for good. It is the sign that we have a covenant, a relationship built on promise and on love, and not a contract, with our faithful God. This is a wonderful thing. God loves us, and each time we see the image of a rainbow, we know God is remembering that love for us.

The Old Testament story of Noah is like a parable. It is a story that uses images to speak to us about profound truth to help us understand better, through the parable what the world is like and what God is like. There are other images in the story, particularly the unruly waters of the flood. In ancient times turbulent water as a symbol of chaos, a chaos going back to another great Old Testament poetic parable, Creation. Out of the chaos, out of the destroying flood, the rainbow emerges to remind us of God's promise that God love us. We are God's beloved.

And though the relationship can be strained. And though we often forget to show our love. And though the clouds can seem heavy and dark, and our world is falling apart, and we feel abandoned, yet, despite all of that, the rainbow emerges. Not taking away the pain and the hurt and isolation, but reminding us that God still remains, with us in the darkness; with us in the pain; with us in the fear; with us when it feels that tears are falling like rain all over our world. We are God's beloved.

The phrase, 'never again', is repeated three times. It sets up the whole dynamic of the Bible. Humanity is given everything, and humanity may throw away everything, but God says 'never again' to destruction, and 'never again' to abandoning the world to the consequences of its sin, and 'never again' to being left unloved. Come what may, we are God's beloved.

This is not only the dynamic of the Bible, it is also the dynamic that sets us up for Jesus. The rainbow, the cross, the person of Jesus – God shows us just how much is His love for us.

Not just humanity, but the whole of Creation. God will judge, but God is also gracious and merciful and slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. It is in God's nature to save. It is in God's nature to create. It is in God's nature to love. We are God's beloved.

God binds His love to all Creation, and to the human race. This is the point of God hanging His 'bow' (like the bow from the bow and arrows – a weapon of war) God hangs His bow in the

heavens. In the ancient world lightning was conceived as God's arrows, fired from a mighty bow. The point of this poetic parable is not only to remind us of the beauty of the earth after a devastating rainstorm; it is to remind us of God's refusal, ever again to take up that divine bow against humanity or the world. The bow is pointed away from the earth and into heaven. God will never forget. God is invested in us and our world. We are God's beloved.

The rainbow is not God's last word of love to us. Jesus is God's last word of love to us. The One about Whom God says, "Thou art my beloved Son..." The One Who, even in the wilderness, another symbol of chaos and terror like the sea, is not left alone by the Father. Love reaches out into the places of fear and temptation and loneliness and loss. Love places a hand of hope upon each one of us. Love does not let us go, even though we may feel bereft. We are God's beloved.

The image of the rainbow not only tells us about God, and what God is like. It should tell us about who we are, and what we are supposed to be like because of God's love. "The Church can respond to God's call to be a place where 'all the colours of the rainbow' [are] welcome and equal in God's sight, in terms of race, age, gender and sexual orientation...The patience and forgiveness spilling forth from the walls of the church, colour its people, and emanate from its doors and windows into the world."¹ The rainbow isn't just a pretty picture, it is a symbol for faith, and hope, and love, lived out loud in a world soaked with loneliness, weary with lockdown, burdened by fear about how things will ever go well again.

We could do with a few more rainbows in our world and in the Church. Jesus might want you for a sunbeam but I suspect He is rather partial to rainbows too. The rainbow is a symbol of hope; a symbol of our remembering God. It is a central message of God's love and hope to us and to all God's children. As we wonder about the possibility of the end of lockdown, whenever that comes, we need to debate our future, but we must create it in mercy, and hope, and love. We must reflect in our living the joyful colours of God's rainbow, God's merciful and hopeful people. We must live as God's beloved, and reflect that love back out into the world around us, and the world beyond us.

The beginning of Lent. A time of giving up, and of taking up. A time of looking inwards, and a time of looking outwards. Maybe also a time of looking upwards, for glimpses of God's rainbow,

the undeserved, unexpected, unimaginable reality of God's unshakeable love, for us, and for our world.

Beloved.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Jane Anne Ferguson, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol2, p30