

The Rainbow

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

An Old Testament scholar made a startling statement about the parable of the Flood and what happened afterwards. He said: "Humankind is hopeless."ⁱ Not in the trivial sense of, 'he's hopeless with numbers', or 'she's hopeless with gardening', but literally hope-less. Without hope.

I don't know whether it is because people feel this has been a longer than usual grey winter, or the news from Ukraine and Russia, or the state complicit murder of outspoken Vladimir Putin critic Alexei Navadny, or the Red Sea and Israel-Palestine atrocities, or the reality of so many of our UK politicians from every political party tearing verbal lumps out of each other in that fevered fashion that seems to mark so much of our elections; but hope seems to be in short supply.

This heaviness of heart pervades a lot of church life locally and nationally. The ongoing season of readjustment has been a bitter thing for many people, even if it is recognised that in many cases it has been long overdue – by about fifty years. The lack of younger people in every congregation is a worry; as worrying as the unwillingness to keep promises many made at marriage, or baptism or becoming church members. Somewhere at the heart of this time in history is a clear nervousness about making commitments. In the transaction between duties and rights, looking after ourselves and looking after our community and world, the growing introspection of many has raised significant challenges in just about every walk of life.

The Very Revd Dr George F MacLeod, a former Moderator, said: "This is a terrifying and yet tremendous time in which to live. Folk are falling away from the Church. It isn't the rogues or the lecherous who are falling away. It is the innumerable nice people. Terrifying – if this is indeed God's world: and His Word and Work alone can cleanse us. But it also begins to emerge that we

live in a *tremendous* time. We begin to know why folk stay away – that there is something to be said for them.” He said this in February 1964, sixty years ago.

Perversely, I never feel more hopeful than when the chips are down. When the world and life seems at their most bleak and desperate, from somewhere I can’t fathom, hope stirs.

The ancient story of Noah is an imaginative writing by an ancient community to fathom God’s love, God’s justice, God’s mercy, God’s hope for the people of the world and creation. Many ancient cultures have Flood stories that destroyed and renewed the world. They are often humanity’s attempts to try to work out, imagine, make sense of the activity of the divine. How does God respond to sin? What difference *can* God make? Is the hope of a new beginning, a fresh start, a world washed clean and all that is in it refreshed really a thing we can believe?

This story about a flood, the turbulent water so feared in the Near Eastern desert world, a symbol of chaos and destruction. But I think we’re meant to look at this Bible story not from a human perspective, but from a God perspective. God will stay and endure and sustain His world notwithstanding the sorry state of humankind. He will not let the rebellion of humankind, its brokenness, its sinfulness sway Him from His grand dream for Creation. “The flood has effected no change in humankind. But it has effected an irreversible change on God, Who now will approach His creation with an unlimited patience and forbearance...His commitment is intensified. For the first time it is marked by grief, the hurt of betrayal. It is now clear that such a commitment on God’s part is costly. The God-world relation is not simply that of a strong God and a needy world....it is...between a grieved God and a resistant world. And of the two, the real changes are in God. This is a key insight into the gospel (of Mark) where the heavens are *torn* open, it hurts God, and the Holy Spirit descends at the time of Jesus’ baptism (cleansing, rejuvenating power in water again), and the world is given the Son of God. Jesus will be tried and tested not to prove

that He is strong enough to do God's will, but that the people who believe in Him and follow Him will recognise Jesus does God's will: not to destroy, but to save. Not to wipe out, but to rebuild. In the story of Jesus' baptism, the images of God's presence are to be found in the descending dove, and the protecting angels. In the story of Noah, God's promise not to destroy creation is framed by the rainbow, the ultimate symbol of hope. Desmond Tutu coined the phrase 'Rainbow nation' for South Africa's diverse and multicultural society emerging from the monochrome brutality of apartheid. The LGBTQI community across the world uses the rainbow flag to reflect the diversity and spectrum of human sexuality and gender. During the Covid pandemic the NHS used the rainbow flag as their sign of hope, that people could still come, whoever they were, whatever their need, however they felt and know that they would still receive treatment in that most desperate of times. Nearer to home, our own Morningside Hope project that supports people with dementia and their carers uses the rainbow as its symbol, again, a symbol of welcome and hope, that even with dementia, the vibrant colours of living are still to be found and encouraged in people's lives.

The creation story of the flood ends not in destruction but in hope, and the rainbow is a sign of God's hope. The Noah story is about despair and hope. It is a parable of condemnation and redemption; of rejection and welcome. God's judgement is overridden, the floods abate, and a hopeful creation emerges out of the chaos and judgement. Hope comes."ⁱⁱ

Humanity is often without hope. Hope depends entirely on a move from God. God resolves to stay with our world, notwithstanding our brokenness. God takes as God's ultimate vocation not judgement but affirmation. God makes an irreversible commitment and says, "Never again". Any brokenness and destruction coming now comes from humanity, and God's heart and purpose is

still to counter that brokenness and destruction. God's heart and purpose alongside all people of goodwill and kindness is to repair and restore and heal and give back life and new beginnings.

On this basis the rainbow sign is established. The bow is a promise. If the bow is remotely a weapon, it is an undrawn bow. God will never again be provoked to use the weapon of total destruction against humanity. The arc of the bow is rooted in the earth but reaches up to heaven, connecting us in vibrant-coloured arc of mercy, and grace, and hope. The God Who is revealed here remains willing to accept hurt to keep hope alive. Hope will never be cut off because of us; hope continues despite us, and because comes again and again into our world to help. Doesn't your heart lift every time you see a rainbow, because you are forced to look up to see it? It comes only when there is darkness and rain but suffused by sunshine. And in the physics and biology of evolution the divine insistence that there is hope to work towards is revealed again and again. It may only last for moments for the rainbow, like hope is an elusive virtue, but also a positive and recurring virtue. Its very existence makes it possible to endure what to those without hope would appear to be hopelessness itself. Hope is a word of strength, not weakness, of anticipation, not hesitation.

Martin Luther King Senior was the father of the great African American civil rights campaigner. Known as Daddy King, he too was a leading figure in the civil rights movement. His son Martin was assassinated in 1968. Another son Alfred Daniel died in an untimely accident in 1969. His wife Alberta was murdered before his eyes by a deranged gunman while she was playing the organ in church.

Invited to preach at Harvard Memorial Church, as he entered the pulpit the congregation rose as one and burst into an applause that lasted for minutes. He couldn't stop them. Finally, he quietened them by saying, "I don't deserve it, but I won't refuse it because I know why you are

doing it." Then he said, "...but I have no bitterness in my heart." He recited each of the terrible things that had happened to him, and after each, like a mantra, he said, "but I have no bitterness in my heart." This was not simply a 'forgive and forget' gesture, for how could a rational man do either? Here was a preacher of hope, preaching the good news that there is more to bad times than bad times: here was hope in hope, as unreasonable as it was indispensable."ⁱⁱⁱ

What does the body of Christ look like in the light of the God's rainbow? What would it mean for our Church, every Church, our home, every home, to put God's rainbow at the hopeful heart of all that we say and think and do? That its light, God's hopeful light, might shine still in every dark place.

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

Amen

ⁱ Walter Brueggemann, Genesis p80

ⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann, Genesis, p80

ⁱⁱⁱ Peter J Gomes, The Good Life, pps270-271