**November 25th 2012**

**Genesis 8.20-9.17**

With all the rain we have had this week it seems very appropriate to have the story of Noah’s Ark as our key Bible story today as we continue our look at the book of Genesis. Many of you have been flooded out this week. Roads have been blocked and impassable, fields have become lakes and streets have become streams. We have had a huge deluge.

Nothing of course to quite compare with the biblical story.

The flood story is often regarded as a must for all children’s bibles, and the ark sometimes features on their covers. *I don’t know if baby Jasper has got any children’s bibles? And whether any have the rainbow and the ark on the front?* The dove that flies from the ark and returns with an olive branch in its beak has become well known and well used symbol of peace, and only outdone by the bright colours of the rainbow that appears at the story’s end.

All this is rather surprising. For the flood story is one of the darkest stories in all scripture and certain aspects of its theology are among the most disquieting we find anywhere in the Bible. One preacher I know talks about the ark being adrift on the ocean of God’s tears. But that is not accurately how Genesis presents it. True there is grief in heaven. True, this grief caused by the violence and wickedness of humanity supplies the reason for God’s destruction of the earth. But beyond that Genesis refuses to go. God in Genesis regrets having created human beings, (6.6, 7) but he does not regret destroying them. In a remarkable little passage near the end of the story (8.21-2) and again when he establishes a new covenant with the earth and all living things upon it, and sets the rainbow in the clouds as its sign (9.8-17), he vows never again to wreck such havoc, yet still he expresses no remorse.

At the end of the creation story in chapter one of Genesis God looked at his creation and said it was good. Now (6.12) he looks at the earth and says it is ruined and decides to wash it clean.

The flood is an utter catastrophe and it is all God’s doing. God opens the floodgates – and returns his creation very nearly back to square one. We can’t say the flood was caused by the violence of God’s creatures and leave it like that. We cannot save God’s skin. Nowadays we would write a story of a nuclear holocaust and Noah building a concrete bunker not an ark. By the terms of Genesis we would have to have God pressing the buttons to launch the missiles.

It’s a chilling thought – and by now you should’ve got drift that this is an adult sermon and I’m not going to give you some twee morals about what the story of Noah’s Ark may mean for us today:

Twee pithy sayings like:

Don't miss the boat.

Don't forget that we're all in the same boat.

Plan ahead. It wasn't raining when Noah built the ark.

Stay fit. When you're 600 years old, someone might ask you to do something REALLY big.

Don't listen to critics, just get on with what has to be done.

When you're stressed, float awhile.

Remember that the ark was built by amateurs; the Titanic was built

by professionals.

Remember that woodpeckers inside are a larger threat than the storm outside.

When the doo-doo gets really deep, don't sit there and complain--shovel!

No matter how bleak it looks, there's always a rainbow on the other side.

I’m not going to give you any glib morals today. This story is really bleak and there is a lot of doo doo!

Whenever you read Bible stories it is not always what is said and how it is said that is significant – but also what is not said that speaks volumes.

There’s lots of speech before and after the flood but absolute silence during it. No lament, cries, agonies. There are people drowning out there and nothing is said. Absolute silence during the death and destruction.

Back on dry land Noah builds an altar and offers sacrifices and these attract God’ attention and bring him close and soothe his heart. Yet this is done in silence. After the intimacy between God and humans in the Garden of Eden and even with the death of Abel, were prayer was as natural as conversation - here we sense the intimacy has been lost. Communicating with God is not as simple as it was before and involves a lot of labour intensive altar building and sacrifices. There is no need for religion till God is felt to be absent, and meeting him is problematic.

As for those drowned in the flood, they are not addressed, they are not even forewarned. They are not given any chance to mend their ways.

All washed away. Silently. It is the most terrible silence in scripture. It seems impossible to sing songs thanking God for saving those tucked up in the ark.

‘The Lord told Noah to build him an arky arky…’

In the end the flood story offer more hope than we could have expected but not because Noah and the rest are safe. Hope arises because the Flood changes God

In chapter 8.21 when God smelt the soothing odour of the sacrifice he said within himself ‘never again shall I put the earth under a curse because of mankind, however evil their inclination may be from their youth upwards, nor shall I ever again kill all living creatures, as I have just done.

Anger has turned to resignation. The fearful passion has been spent in the havoc of the flood. God has been softened by the sweet aroma of sacrifice.

Yet human beings haven’t changed. God knows that their violence will continue to consume His creation. All he can do is try and limit their slaughter by outlawing the killing of other human beings.

The next episode returns us to normality. Noah gets drunk and is found terribly disgraced by one of his sons. The result of that is a curse and the braking apart of the family that survived the flood. Then comes the Tower of Babel and further disintegration of the larger human family and further damage to their relationship to God.

The flood has not changed human beings but it has changed God.

God promises never again to seek absolute control of events. He will retain the status, the dignity and the freedom for human beings he first gave them at Creation. He will allow them their power, however they choose to exercise it and whatever the cost for the rest of his creation. He will live with them whatever the price he has to pay. Little did the storyteller know that one day it would cost him death on the cross? Or that the power to destroy the earth would one day be gained by human beings through the invention of the nuclear bomb.

After the flood we enter new era in the generosity, the patience and the pain of the God of genesis, we find all humanity and creation given a new security. The rhythms of life can be relied upon. No threat of destruction hangs over them. Human violence will no longer be met with the punishment it deserves. Ruin will not be answered with ruin.

The demands of mercy can, and inevitably will, transcend those of justice. The world after the flood has more room for God’s grace. Grace is built into the new order of things.

Here lies the hope of the story.

But it is not an easy story – and not really a children’s story is it?

If you remember during Lent I told how this story and the influence of her six year old daughter were significant in my wife’s hairdresser coming to faith. As she was doing Debbie’s hair in our kitchen she got talking about how her daughter had been looking at the story of Noah’s Ark at school and had been asking her some hard questions – like why did God send a flood?

Do you believe in God?’ I asked

‘Yes I think there is someone there’ came the reply. ‘But if God sends a flood and kills everyone he can’t be that nice’.

I said ‘For me the story of Noah’s Ark is how if there is a good God how does God deal with evil? Many ancient cultures had myths and legends about floods and how they were signs that the gods were displeased with humanity and decided to make a clean start. This was the ancient view and interpretation of what we would call natural disasters.

I said ‘For me the Bible works out it understands of what God is like throughout the bible. Some theologians call it progressive revelation – in the early stages humanity fumbled around in the dark not knowing much about God. For Christians., a vital aspect of our belief is that we believe God came in the flesh – as one of us, as Jesus – to clear up any misunderstanding of how God would react and whether god is for us or against us.

So when Jesus in his pursuit of justice and freedom and salvation for all, met with opposition and was crucified, he didn’t resort to force and violence, he didn’t call down God’s wrath from on high, but he offered forgiveness and a love that evil, sin and death couldn’t conquer. He overcame evil with good, his love casts out fear, his life showed the way through evil and death. Our hairdresser wanted to know more about Jesus – she took a gospel and started to attend a church near where she lived and went on an alpha course and came to faith.

He flood story connects with me at those times when I had been fed up and wanted to throw in the towel.

There are times I’m sure when we have all thought - why am I doing this? What is the point? Maybe times we have walked away, or abandoned something or even someone?

I remember running a church kids club once on a rough council estate. I hardly had any help. The kids were unruly and non-appreciative. The parents didn’t co-operate = they were just glad to get rid of their kids for an hour. Each week I dreaded doing it and in the end I closed it. It was a hard decision to come to but it wasn’t happening - not with the scarce resources I had. I wiped the dust of my feet and walked away.

I’m sure we have been there – times when you have been pushed to the limit – times when you have wanted to pack it all in, walk away. This Genesis story about the flood has God having the same attitude to His creation. What was good has now been ruined. It is no longer perfect and a right hassle. Time to walk away – time to start again – clean sweep, wash it all down the river.

Except that when people do that thy run away from the real issues. They run away and don’t actually confront their real pain and the opportunity for growth – to mature, to go deeper.

I ran away from the kids club because I went into it trying to be the big Messiah figure –behold your saviour comes. I hadn’t thought it through. I was idealistic not realistic. I hadn’t done the planning, nor got the resources together to make it a success. I had to honestly reflect on what had gone wrong and learn from it.

It is always tempting to walk away. Try not to. Try to work it through.

The early church did not initially use the cross as a symbol of their faith. The humiliation of Jesus public execution was too fresh in their memories. Instead, early Christian art often depicted the ark. It stood for the church and salvation for those within it, by faith. By the ark God gave the human race a second chance, even as the gospel gives us the opportunity for redemption.

Some people think they cannot come to God. One man committed sins in the past for which he was sure God would never forgive him. He had been involved with some atrocities in wartime. I can see how such people, who are having trouble forgiving themselves, could wonder if God could ever forgive them.

Another person was an older man who was dying. All his life he had rejected the thought of God in his life. Toward the end of his life, I offered him God’s gifts of forgiveness and eternal life. He refused, saying it just would not be right to wait until the end.

If humans tend towards self-interest rather than altruism and goodness God will no longer be disheartened and surprised by this. God is patient . God does not give up on humanity.

As we follow Jesus we are called to follow in the way of forbearing, patient love, a love that doesn’t give up or walk away.

*Who knows what path Jasper will take in life? I pray you will always be there for him, that you will know God’s strength and love for him*