

CYPRESS

Reading

Genesis 6.11-22

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. And God said to Noah, 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above; and put the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks. For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive. Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them.' Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.

Talk

There is some doubt about what kind of wood Noah's Ark was made from. I have gone with the NRSV's translation of 'cypress' - but there is a note in the text which says the meaning of the Hebrew word is uncertain. It was certainly quite a timber order, whatever it was - the dimensions as defined in Genesis are roughly 450' long, 75' wide and 45' deep. But then, it had a lot to contain - the ultimate gene bank of pre-history. It isn't the only saving boat in the Bible of course - the next one we hear about is the very small boat, a pitch covered basket in which the infant Moses was placed by his mother in her clever ruse to save him from Pharaoh's declared intention to wipe out the Hebrew people by killing all the baby boys. It is the same picture of salvation from destruction through something floating on the water. But whereas Moses' basket boat might be historical, here we have a mythical boat. Remember that a myth in biblical terms is a fictional story which carries an absolute truth. It is one of the many stories in the Old Testament which portray God as getting so fed up with his creation that like a potter deciding the clay isn't behaving as he wants it to, and squashing it flat to start again, God is about to wipe out all that he has made. Yet he can't do the full job - and he seeks to save what is not beyond redemption. And according to the story, the only thing beyond redemption is this man Noah, a 'righteous and blameless man' as it describes him. For

Jews and Christians this carries an important message about the ultimate loving nature of God. Despite everything, he cannot destroy all his creation. For Christians there is another dimension. This takes us into the realm of what theologians call 'typology'. So they would say that Noah is a 'type' of Christ – a foreshadowing in another story of what the story of Jesus would be about. The righteousness of one man saves humanity and all the rest of creation in the Noah story, and the righteousness of Jesus brings about the salvation of the world in a new way – and that is what we are celebrating this weekend. Maybe it is worth recalling that although we don't often talk about it, the New Testament writers did talk about Christ's sacrifice being not just for human beings, but for the whole of creation. The parallelism, specifically the typology of these two stories is very close and very powerful. Remember that Noah's righteousness not only saves him, but his sons Shem, Ham and Japheth, Noah's wife and his daughters-in-law. We are not told they are righteous, and interestingly in the medieval mystery play of Noah, his wife is portrayed as being a very difficult character. They got saved because of someone else's goodness – precisely the point we remember on Good Friday. We have no righteousness of our own, but we claim the righteousness of Christ.

The Noah story introduces a very important word into the history of Judaeo-Christian religion. We read that God says 'I will establish my covenant with you'. A covenant is a very special thing in religious terms. It is a solemn and binding agreement between God and mankind. There are several such important covenants in the Old Testament. Most of them are historical, but this one in the story prefigures them. It is picked up again at the end of the flood story, when the sign of the covenant, of God's eternal goodwill to people, will be the rainbow. There is the Abraham covenant in which God promises to Abram, as he then was, that he would be their God and they his people, and that they would be given a promised land. And circumcision was to be the sign of that promise (and the ceremony is still called berith, or bris, the Hebrew word for covenant to this day). Then there is the covenant with Moses, at Mount Sinai, with the giving of the Ten Commandments. And later promises were taken to be covenantal as well – like the promises to David. It is the word that our forefathers translated as 'Testament'. So the two parts of the Bible which we call Old and New Testaments could more accurately be called Old and New Covenants. When we celebrate Communion, we go back to the words Jesus said at the Last Supper 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood'. Paul picks up on this in several places, in parts of his letters which most of us find quite hard to grasp – have a go at reading Galatians Chapter 3 to see what I mean. Writing to the Ephesians he talks about Gentiles being 'strangers to the covenants of promise' but then goes on to say how through the sacrifice of Jesus, they are heirs of God's promise. Let me quote Rob Lacey's paraphrase of that: 'You were barricaded out of the Jewish passport office: there was a fat chance of getting in on any of the goodies from the contract with God. You had no prospects. You didn't know God. But since the Liberator Jesus sacrificed his lifeblood, your link

with him gets you up and personal with God.’ That is our focus today – the forging of this new covenant, this new contract, by Jesus, who carries us along with him like Noah carried his family and the animals.

So it is not surprising that Christians from the beginning made connections with the Noah story. Peter writes in his first letter ‘The water of the flood is a picture of the baptism that now saves you also. The baptism I’m talking about has nothing to do with removing dirt from your body. Instead it promises God that you will keep a clear sense of what is right and wrong.’ So people began to talk of the Church as an Ark. St Cyprian of Carthage famously put it like this in the 3rd century ‘Extra ecclesiam nulla salus’ – there is no salvation outside the church. Now that has been unfortunately interpreted at some points in history by some Christians to mean that you can only be saved if you are a member of a particular church. But then it all depends on what you mean by church. Literally, the church is those who are called out, those who are apart from the secular world. So our petty ecclesiastical divisions are irrelevant. But ‘outside the company of the followers of Jesus, there is no salvation’ remains a statement we have to wrestle with, and which is still contentious, because it doesn’t take account of that total renewal of covenant between God and mankind to which parts at least of the New Testament bear witness. If anyone wants to examine this in detail, can I commend Gerald O’Collins’ book ‘Salvation for All’, which I suspect would have some of his Jesuit forefathers turning in their graves as he looks at what he calls in one chapter ‘The Universal Benevolence of God.’ The Church as an Ark is literally built into our architecture. Countless churches look like a boat upside down, the rafters being the ribs of a ship’s hull. The message about flood and being saved is echoed in the rite by which we celebrate the entry of people into being part of the New Covenant people – the rite of baptism, the drowning and rising from drowning which symbolises dying and rising with Jesus. Noah, and his ark of Cypress, or whatever the tree was, stays very close to much of what we do.