

SERMON: 18 February 2024

Lectionary readings:

Genesis 9 v8-17; Psalm 25 v1-10; 1 Peter 3 v18-22; Mark 1 v9-15.

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“As long as the earth endures ...”

Lord , may the words I speak be faithful to the written word and lead us to the living Word,

There are many extra-ordinary phenomena in nature involving light, but rainbows are very near the top of my list, only surpassed by the Northern Lights that we were so lucky to see last autumn when we went to Norway. The Aurora certainly gives a new meaning to the overused word “awesome”, but rainbows can pretty much hold their own in that regard, as they are also full of awe, beautiful and amazing and they always make me smile every time there is one in the sky, even if I have never seen any pot of gold at the end of it !!!! ///

As we know, the rainbow has been chosen by the LGBT community to reflect its immense diversity but also the unity of the movement. And it was archbishop Desmond Tutu who called the people of South Africa, a “rainbow nation” which we can see illustrated in the South African flag.// So for us modern people, it is a pretty significant symbol, but when we read chapter 9 of Genesis, the rainbow has another meaning: it is the sign of a covenant, the first ever in the Hebrew Bible between God and a human being, something which was unique to Judaism among the religions of the world. There will be other covenants later on: with Abraham, Moses and king David, before what we called the “New Covenant” through Jesus. Those are all very important of course but the covenant with Noah is very special, not only because it is the first but for other reasons as we will see in a minute. But just a short reminder for now:

When we try to understand the biblical texts, **context is everything**. The story of the covenant with Noah is no exception as it forms an integral part of a larger unit where we learn that after Adam and Eve left the Garden, things began a downward spiral. Humanity lived in a good world that they turn bad and the entire flood narrative - nearly 4 chapters- is the culmination of a story of increasing human wickedness, violence and corruption of the earth. So just before the story of the flood begins, we learn that and I quote *“the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil, continually”* and it adds: “God was **grieved in his heart**”. Note that God was **grieved, full of sorrow**, it does NOT say God was angry... Keep this in mind... ///

And so, God sends the floodwaters to cleanse the earth and erase humanity's wickedness. In other words, the flood is the de-creation of the world where the earth sinks back into the chaotic waters that God cleared away in the beginning of creation in Genesis 1 and 2. However, the righteous Noah and his family and a pair of each animal survived the flood, unharmed, thanks to a big ship and they can start afresh in a world returned to innocence.

This is a very familiar story that has enchanted many generations of children but no matter how you tell the story, God still wipes out **all of humanity** except one family! And I am thinking: "How can such a cataclysmic disaster of epic proportions, a genocide really, be reflecting the goodness of God? It seems at first view, a pretty radical and **possibly** disproportionate punishment! So how can we understand this? Well, I would think that the clue is in the fact that, as I pointed out earlier, God is not angry, **he is grieved in his heart**, in other words he is disappointed, because he made the earth to be a place where humanity could flourish, but instead they turned it into a theatre of violence, and that fills him with sorrow. So he decides to cleanse the earth with a huge flood and through that cleansing, **he wants to start anew with the human race and establish a totally NEW relationship:** Hence what follows: the first covenant with a human being, Noah. /////

But God is not naïve, he does not have any illusion about the capacity of human beings to stop their transgressions. In chapter 8, just before the passage we heard today, God says: "Never again will I curse the ground **even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood.**" You see, God does NOT say "I will never destroy the earth again, **IF Noah and his descendants never sin again**", he just says, "I will never again destroy the earth **IN SPITE OF HUMAN WICKEDNESS**" and to remember this, he creates a sign: the rainbow, a sign therefore of grace, acceptance, and redemption. **And what is extraordinary about this is that it is a unilateral promise,** in other words, the obligations and limitations inherent to a normal covenant, which binds 2 or more people in a mutual exchange (a bit like a contract) do not apply here. These obligations and limitations are **on God alone** who reaches out to the world, doing all the heavy lifting while Noah does not do or say anything at all. ///

This is extraordinary enough in itself, but God goes even further as this first covenant is also with "every living creature," and even more remarkably with **"the earth" itself**. So, we cannot miss the environmental implications of such an eco-covenant which extends throughout all time. But while God has promised never to destroy the world again by floods, it seems that the human race, being ever so greedy, has taken over that role of destruction: As climate change warms the earth and melts the ice caps, the prospect of a flooded earth looms larger every day as we saw here just a few weeks ago and in many other countries ... ///

But there is something else about that eco-covenant which is striking: it is its universality: The welfare of the earth is a matter for all of humanity **and the promise is made to everybody**. Remember that this is the religious text of a very small country, Israel, and at the time, an insignificant vassal state subject to the major players in the region, a group of people whose Jewish identity was maintained by differentiating themselves from others by every available means. Yet here, in this text—**their text**—they tell the story of their deity making a covenant **with all the living things on earth, everywhere in the world** and the sign of this is the rainbow, becoming therefore **a sign of inclusivity** and unity... which brings us back one more time to that rainbow with which we started: Have you noticed that God does not say "every time **you** see the rainbow, **YOU** will remember your covenant with me", no, he says "every time **I** see the rainbow, I will remember my covenant with **you**... //// That's strange, does God need reminders? Is his memory failing? I don't think so! I think he says that, because he seems to finally accept human beings as they are, imperfect and sinning but still wants to love them and protect them. That's the new relationship I was talking about earlier. So even if human beings continue to transgress – and they will – and they do!

- in contrast, God decides not to give up on them, **therefore making himself vulnerable**. Whoa, this is an extraordinary and daring idea about a God who is voluntarily imposing limitations on his own prerogatives because of the loving relationship he has established with humanity and wants it to endure.

Now, you surely remember your lessons from Sunday school about the many characteristics of God: all these "omni" words: **omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent** ... but we also learnt that God was **immutable** (or unchanging in plain English) ... Well, this is **NOT** at all what we see here: we see that the heart of God is changeable, adaptable and that he is willing to accept to be grieved and hurt by the people he loves. Traditionally, Christian redemption is associated with changing humanity fitting itself to an unchanging God but the covenant with Noah tells us a different, wonderful, story, a story full of hope: that God has an ongoing desire to be in relationship with an ungrateful humanity because he made an **unconditional** promise that he will keep, come what may... And this is why this passage has been chosen by the Lectionary at the beginning of Lent because, as David Lose a well-known commentator, writes "Lent is a journey to the other side of God, a venture not to the familiar terrain of God's immutability and omnipotence but instead, to the weakness and vulnerability of a loving and personal God and Spirit."

So what does all that teach us? Well, if God himself voluntarily surrenders his divine prerogatives for the sake of love, could it be that we should also show people around us more respect, support, and love even if it is a unilateral attempt from us, **without expecting reciprocity**. It is a tall order as we tend to want a bit of return for our acts of kindness, but it might not be a bad challenge to take on in this season of Lent. **Amen**