

Dorset South & West Circuit Service

Sunday 21 February - Prepared by Rev'd Peter Clark

As you prepare yourself for worship, take a moment to connect yourself not only with God but with the whole body of Christ on earth who are worshipping today, separate but together, solitary but as One.

Call to Worship

Come together to be God's people.

Come together and be yourselves.

Bring to God your joys and your struggles.

Bring to God your hopes and your fears.

Come together to be God's people,

and let us worship the living God

Hymn 1 - Thou whose almighty word

Though whose almighty word
Chaos and darkness heard,
And took their flight;
Hear us, we humbly pray,
And where the gospel-day
Sheds not its glorious ray,
Let there be light!

Thou who didst come to bring,
On Thy redeeming wing,
Healing and sight;
Health to the sick in mind,
Sight to the inly blind,
O now to all mankind
Let there be light!

Spirit of truth and love,

Life-giving, holy Dove,
Speed forth Thy flight;
Move on the waters' face,
Bearing the lamp of grace,
And in earth's darkest place
Let there be light!

Blessèd and holy Three,
Glorious Trinity,
Wisdom, love, might;
Boundless as ocean's tide
Rolling in fullest pride,
Through the world far and wide
Let there be light!

John Marriott (1780-1825)

Prayers of Adoration

Loving, faithful God, your love is absolute, your promises irrevocable.

We look up after a shower of rain, marvelling at the colourful beauty of your rainbow – a reminder of your promise and faithfulness to all generations.

Wherever we happen to be – wilderness, mountain or valley bottom – your Holy Spirit is with us.

We adore you, loving, faithful God.

Amen.

Prayer of Preparation

Beloved Lord Jesus, you stepped from water to wilderness, from God's voice to the taunting voice of the enemy. In the wilderness of today's world, we face many enemies, many temptations. Forgive us for succumbing to selfishness, greed, lust, anger, power.

Sometimes difficult times follow fast on the heels of one another. And it's hard to keep our focus on you. Forgive us.

Help us not to wallow in selfish self-centredness, but to remember your promises and recognise you in those you bring alongside.

Forgive us when our minds fail to focus on you and your word. Help us to remember that no matter what we're going through, you've been there before us. Whether we're swimming in the warm waters of your love, or journeying through the arid wilderness, help us not to lose sight of your hand guiding us to eternal glory at rainbow's end. Amen.

Prayer of Assurance

Lord Jesus Christ, you went from water to wilderness to suffering on the cross. There you, beloved Son of God, died in your physical body for our sins. Through your blood we are washed clean of all our guilt. And we are able to enter the presence of God with whom you now

sit, having been raised in the Spirit. All angels, power and authorities submit to you. Because of you, we are forgiven.

Praise be to Jesus, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Scripture Reading - Genesis 9:8-17

8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: 9 "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you 10 and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. 11 I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth." 12 And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: 13 I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. 14 Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, 15 I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. 16 Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth." 17 So God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth."

Reflection

I was privileged to attend the annual Methodist Ministers Conference last month which of course was held on Zoom and we had two presentations from an eco-focused Christian group, A Rocha. Prompted by these I couldn't help but view today's set reading from Genesis through their lens - hence I credit many of the ideas to them?

In the same way that Jesus expressed his vision of the Kingdom of God through stories - parables - so I see much of the Hebrew Scriptures as narratives from which we draw conclusions about the nature of God and God's relationship with humanity and the whole of Creation. Thus I struggle to read Genesis 1 as anything but a parabolic tale of God's oversight of the creation of the universe and our particular part of it.

So, when 'God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them ... blessed them, and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth," I read that as a commission to us as stewards of creation. Sadly humanity has interpreted that term translated as 'dominion over' creation as meaning it is ours to use as we wish, rather than an instruction to care for it and seek the common good of the Earth and all the creatures we share it with. In recent decades, this has had disastrous environmental results!

One of the A Rocha speakers displayed an image of the interior of the International Space Station, on the face of it a chaotic and confusing display of screen, wires, dials and keyboards but boiling down to the Life Support System for the astronauts living in the ISS. He suggested that if a toddler were let loose there, it might wander around pulling wires, poking things and seeing what would happen as a result? He said that, effectively that is what humanity has done with the Earth, particularly since the Industrial Revolution and has resulted in the current situation whereby the very future of the planet is in jeopardy.

As so often when jeopardy is faced, it is the poorest who are likely to suffer the worst, though we will all be affected, and increasingly in the nearer and nearer future?

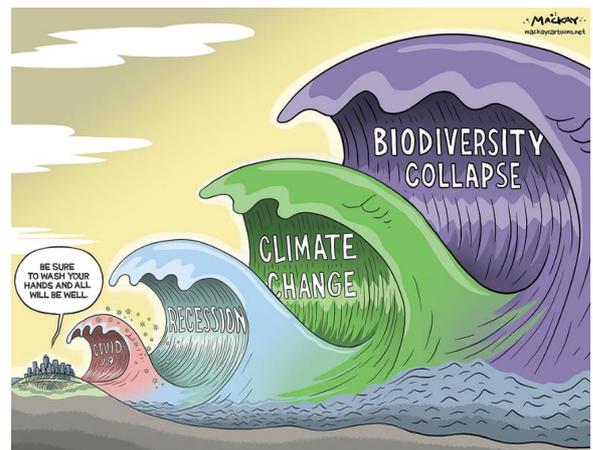
There was a cartoon released some months ago of a city faced with a large wave (with the words 'Covid 19') approaching a city and the words "Be sure to wash your hands and all will be well" issuing from the city. Behind that wave was a bigger one, labelled 'Recession.'

Another cartoonist, however, developed the concept further by adding a bigger wave behind the second labelled, 'Climate Change' and an even bigger one - in fact a massive one - behind that

labelled, 'Biodiversity Collapse!' It is a graphic and frightening portrayal of the future, don't you think?

And I wondered if, perhaps, we could reinterpret the parable of Noah and the flood as a message in the light of this image? Because it is very easy and probably simplistic to suggest that floods, climate change etc. are a judgment by God on humanity's treatment of the planet, just as the flood parable suggests in the light of our disappointing misbehaviour that God wished to start again?

And it is worth being reminded that though we are used to remembering that all creatures were saved 'two by two,' the text actually says that there were seven pairs of the useful animals and, significantly only four pairs of humans! How does that make us think of ourselves as the prime creatures of creation, I wonder?



And reading our text today I am reminded that there is a deep level of regret expressed by God for the destruction and loss of life caused by the flood that, I would argue, demonstrates God's passionate love for Creation and the Created? Which is where the rainbow comes in as a sign if not of God's contrition and remorse and a promise that there will be no repeat. Well certainly not one initiated by God, anyway!

Which, as so often with biblical parables, leads us to commit to respond. But with a challenge this big it is easy to think those waves portrayed in the cartoon are insuperable?

Not so, for we have not quite reached the tipping point of irreversible change!

However, it will require change in the way that we act which, for us in the rich West, will take quite some effort. We have become quite used to the freedom that cars offered to us and simply switching to electric vehicles will not of itself cut our carbon footprints as we will have to significantly reduce car journeys overall (so my switching to a hybrid car two years ago is only a very small step, even if the pandemic has massively reduced my mileage!) We also need to reduce our global travel (which, having family in Dubai and Australia is going to be very hard for me!) Plus work out ways of being vastly more economic and sustainable in our domestic and work energy use (which is going to be some challenge for those of us who run large buildings e.g. churches?)

Indeed, none of this is going to be easy, for change never is but there is a global imperative as our speakers argued. They also proposed a new way of thinking about our vision within creation, offering the following three representations:



'Nature for people' - the flawed model of seeing ourselves as here to subdue creation for our own (short-term) benefit



'Nature for itself' - a healthier model perhaps of seeing ourselves as simply a part of creation and but therefore neutral about responsibility and humanity being passive within it?



'Nature within itself' - an even better model and, I would argue a theological one in line with the reinterpretation of that 'subdue' command being about 'Stewardship?' We are called, instructed even, to take our place within creation, caring, influencing, defending, supporting it in a responsible and sustainable manner?

All of which is, perhaps all very well but is a huge ask and a massive challenge to carry out alone?

Which is where the rainbow comes in, for as ‘God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth.”’ God never wound us up and left us to manage alone. Problems occurred and always do when we forget that and try to manage alone to work things out on our own (the message I would argue of the parable of the Fall from the Garden of Eden - but that's another story for another time!)

No, our magnificent, creative and imaginative God created our Earth and all the other creatures and offered a Covenant to be there alongside us, guiding, caring, influencing, defending and supporting humanity as we do the same within nature! The rainbow is the reminder of that promise, reiterated in Jesus’ parting words of Matthew 28:20, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

With the company of one such as that and a promise of that magnitude, how can we not give it a go? Amen

Offertory & Prayer of Dedication

God, in the midst of your challenge to care for and support this, your creation, we give thanks for all that is offered by your people in time, offerings and support for each other and for our local churches. So we ask for your blessing upon these gifts and offerings in the name of Jesus who gave everything for us. Amen

Prayers

God of creation who has handed this world to us to share alongside and along with those others you created, we come before you in awe. We encounter a God who can envisage duck-billed platypus and swans and ostriches - all birds; who can call into being grass and bushes and trees - all plants; produce an abundance of fruit, grain, berries, pulses - all food; who can create mice and horses, humans and whales, all mammals:- and we come before you humbled by your creativity and originality.

God who calls us to care for this world and its occupants, who expects us to respect and succour your creation, who demands that we don't abuse our abilities and strengths and powers and seek our own pleasures and desires over the needs of those who share the planet with us, we acknowledge that, gifted and able as we are, we cannot do it alone. So we cry out and seek, as members of your Covenanted People, to work alongside you, empowered by you, encouraged by you and supported by you, to find ways to work better, more lovingly and more sustainably to fulfil our side of that covenanted relationship and calling.

We pray that you will thus enable us to carry out the Father's will, in the faith of the Son and in the power of the Spirit. Amen.

Hymn - In heavenly love abiding

In heavenly love abiding,
No change my heart shall fear;
And safe is such confiding,
For nothing changes here;
The storm may roar without me,
My heart may low be laid,
But God is round about me,
And can I be dismayed?

Wherever he may guide me,
No want shall turn me back;
My Shepherd is beside me,
And nothing can I lack:
His wisdom ever waketh
His sight is never dim;
He knows the way he taketh,
And I will walk with him.

Green pastures are before me,
Which yet I have not seen;
Bright skies will soon be o'er me,
Where darkening clouds have
been:
My hope I cannot measure,
My path to life is free;
My Saviour has my treasure,
And he will walk with me.

Anna L Waring (1832-1910)

Blessing

Creator God, you made us in your image to be your people, wherever we go.

This coming week, whatever we experience, wherever we find ourselves,
help us to know that you are with us – guiding, revealing and sustaining – always.

Amen.

(Some prayers © 2002-2021, ROOTS for Churches Ltd.)