

NOAH AND THE FLOOD



Peter Stuart:

Is there anybody here who doesn't recognise what this is? An easy question to answer, especially for those who went through a Sunday School! The story of Noah's Ark has always been a favourite one to tell children and get them to illustrate it.

Another question for you: when was the last time you heard an adult sermon about the meaning of Noah and the Flood?

Well, today Phyllis and I going to reflect with you on the significance of the Noah story in our Scriptures. The Noah tradition deserves to be rescued from the mindless literalism and trivialisation which have too often obscured the profound truths embedded in it.

Ivan Aivazovsky (1817–1900), *Descent of Noah from Ararat*, 1889 oil on canvas, 128 x 218 cm, National Gallery of Armenia



So no, we're not taking you on an expedition to discover the remains of the Ark on Mt Ararat, a snow-covered volcanic mountainous area in the extreme east of present day Turkey, seen here in this painting by an Armenian Romantic artist **Ivan Aivazovsky**. Noah is depicted leading his family and animals across the Ararat plain, with the waters from the flood still receding.

Mt Ararat is real enough. However, I don't believe there ever was an Ark to start with. But I take the Noah story as seriously as I do the creation stories in the first chapters of Genesis – and that's very seriously indeed. Nor do I see how we can understand either without the other.

First, we focus on the figure of Noah as representing 'someone who honestly faces up to reality and to what God may be saying'.

Phyllis Mossman:

Noah plays different roles at various points in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The Genesis narrative about him is itself not as simple as it looks, and weaves together different sources, including stories from other religious traditions about a Flood. Later, in Ezekiel, Noah becomes a classic example of 'righteousness' to be rewarded at the Last Judgement. In the period just before Jesus, the Flood comes to prefigure an apocalyptic End of Time, with Noah personifying the righteous remnant devoted to the one true God.

Moving to the New Testament: We read in the letter to the Hebrews

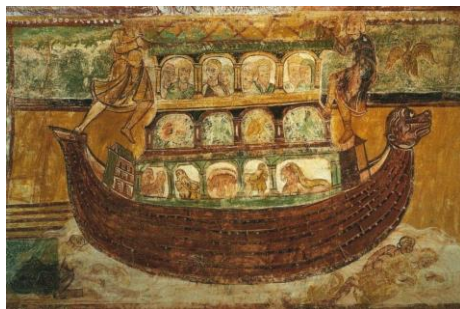
'By faith Noah took good heed of the divine warning about the unseen future, and built an ark to save his household. Through his faith he put the whole world in the wrong, and made good his own claim to the righteousness which comes by faith.'

In the 2nd Letter of Peter, Noah is a 'herald of righteousness' amongst the ungodly. There's a shift to making him actively witness to or proclaim a message.

Then in early Christian tradition Noah takes on a two-fold significance:

- He becomes a figure of the faithful believing Christian, preaching repentance like John the Baptist, in the face of impending catastrophe and judgement.
- And Noah also becomes a figure of Christ himself, whose death and resurrection and role as the new Adam are prefigured in the destruction by the Flood and the new beginning for humankind after the Flood. (The Ark of course then becomes the Church, and the Flood the waters of baptism (*1 Peter 3:20-21*)).

Noah's Ark, 11th Century, in the middle of frescoes of 11th C frescoes occupying the entire Romanesque arch, St Savin sur Gartempe, France



In this 11th century fresco in a French church, the Ark can be read as an image of salvation, floating above the destructive waters of the Flood. We see the Ark with animals on the deck floor, birds on the middle floor, and human couples above. All the figures are separated by Romanesque arches like the arch which the painting decorates. At either end of the Ark could be two angels protecting it.

This is all strong rich stuff, far removed from the Sunday School ditties, pictures and pretty stories many of us were raised with. What we are to make of it is another matter.

The reference of Jesus Himself to Noah (in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke) is striking.

'For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until

the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left' (Matthew 24:38-40).

Peter:

Let's focus on the contrast between those who 'know', and those who don't. This contrast is in both this Gospel passage and the Noah story in Genesis.

Those who **'know'** (like Noah), that catastrophe is possible: in the story, he knows by divine revelation; the realm of prophecy and inspiration. In the 21st Century, human beings discern the shadow of global environmental catastrophe by science and conscience – though prophecy may also have its place.

Those who **don't 'know'** (like the generations swept away by the Flood): in that story, they are blind to the violence and corruption of society and participate in it, provoking God to sweep all away and begin again. In the 21st Century, human beings still, in T.S.Eliot's words, quote, 'cannot stand very much reality'. There's straight **narcissism**: my unwillingness to look beyond myself. There's **denial**: my desire to avoid painful or inconvenient truth. There's **failure of imagination**: my inability to 'think globally'. There's **blindness to the systems we live in**: my unwillingness to detach myself from destructive collective actions from which I profit temporarily.

And so we human beings 'eat and drink and marry and give in marriage' as though this planet were unchangeable and our place on it invulnerable. I don't want to know, and even when I do know, I don't want to change. That 'I' is not a rhetorical 'I'; it's me, Peter Stuart, speaking. I put eco-bulbs in my light fittings and a solar panel on my roof, but I drive my car long distances, and I fly to the Northern Hemisphere. I am a 20th Century man with 20th Century habits, and the 21st Century cannot afford me.

In the story of Noah, we see a man with the courage to stand apart and see things as they are **morally**, and with the openness to hear God speaking and then act on what he hears.

Marc Chagall, *L'Arche de Noe*, oil on canvas, 234 x 236 cm, Musée National Message Biblique, Marc Chagall, Nice, France



Phyllis:

The Russian Jewish artist Marc Chagall in the 1960's painted this picture of Noah's Ark. It reminds me of both an etching and a stained glass window, with figures emerging out of the

colours. This work speaks of Chagall's sympathy for the spiritual relationship of humankind and God, as it portrays humankind as a mediator between God and His other creatures.

In today's world, we need to recover a spirituality of truth-seeking and truth-acting. In any predicament which threatens the planet, 'truth' is an essential element in what will save us. It may also save us from false dramatization and alarmism. Some people always get a kick out of shouting 'The End is nigh!', and many other people, including scientists, go down blind alleys. We need to scrutinise our reasons and our motives for accepting this or that account of 'reality'. But now, as never before, we have a duty to seek out the science, whatever it is - and to ponder its **moral** implications. It's sometimes said that 'the devil is in the detail'. Perhaps. But so too is God. And He is also in the provisional big picture which science progressively reveals. How big is our God?

Michelangelo The Deluge, 1508-12, fresco, Sistine ceiling, Vatican



Well, Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel in 16th century Rome certainly envisions God as all-powerful. Here in this ceiling fresco we see the wind and the rain, the flood of God's wrath, the consequences of the wickedness of humankind. The Ark, with Noah and his family, floats at the rear of the picture, while the rest of humanity tries frantically to scramble to some point of safety. Michelangelo uses human form as a vehicle to convey the implications of the wrath of God. Instead of concentrating on God's chosen survivor Noah, Michelangelo concentrated on the anguish of all who are doomed to drown.

There's an overlap between religion and loving concern for the Earth and its creatures. Not so long ago this overlap was, more often than not, a soft 'nature mysticism'. This can be too easily dismissed perhaps as 'tree-hugging', or identified with the sentimentality of pet services on the Feast of St Francis, but you know what we mean. Now this soft 'nature mysticism' presumed two things: a safe and orderly world, and human mastery over it.

The story of the Flood in Genesis puts us in touch with a very different perspective, one perhaps far more useful for a spirituality relevant to us as we front up to ecological challenge. What we are confronting this century is **the precariousness of 'Nature'**. Even supposing the eco-sceptics are right, namely that we are simply going through one of those periodic changes which shape this planet, that's really not very reassuring. Why? Because whatever science may be predicting about the future, it's also revealing a past in which those 'periodic changes' had dramatic and sometimes catastrophic impacts on living things. In **human times**, the Earth's climate has been reasonably friendly to human beings, but that climate is not typical when we look at **geological time**.

And if the eco-sceptics are wrong, then for every degree the earth's atmospheric temperature rises, huge environmental shifts will occur, within which we not only have to

learn to survive, but also walk with God. And climate change is by no means the only radical ecological challenge facing us.

Peter:

Now both the creation stories in Genesis and the Noah story presume there is only one God, the all-powerful Creator. However there's a twist in the first creation story in Genesis 1. Nowhere there does it say God creates **the waters**. The waters there are primordial, they are chaos, and the Spirit of God hovers over them. Bear that in mind as we approach the Flood of Noah.

In Genesis, God creates out of chaos, not out of nothing. And a Jewish scholar [Jon Levenson], observes, '*The [Noah] story manifests a profound anxiety about the givenness of nature, a keen sense of its precariousness*'.

In one of the strands of the Noah story, the rising waters are not the result of sustained rain; they are the waters of chaos stored above the heavens and beneath the earth irrupting into what we might call 'Middle Earth'.

William Turner (1775-1851) *Shade and Darkness, The Evening of the Deluge*, c. 1843, oil on canvas, 787 x 781 mm, London: Tate



The English artist William Turner captured this well in his *Shade and Darkness, The Evening of the Deluge*, generating the strongest of emotions for the viewer, through the portrayal of this really most disturbing notion of God's punishment. The sublime in art operates here to generate uncertainty and even terror.

But why, in the Noah story, did God 'send' a **Flood**, rather than, say, a hail of meteors? Is it simply one of the various possible punishments on a corrupt humanity? Or is the Noah story, by using a 'Flood', really saying something even more profound? Does God, faced with the disorder of human disobedience, simply deal with it by (as it were) **ceasing** to 'create', ceasing to shape and control the waters of chaos? Thus the generations between Adam and Noah bring on themselves the return of primal chaos by violating the order God is creating, and by failing to play the part He has given them within that creation. Human beings fill the earth with violence and corruption, they transgress the divine order, and the result allowed by God is – the return of cosmic chaos. God allows it, and starts again.

How do we translate this into the 21st Century? And where is Christ in all this?

Perhaps we can at least say this:

1. **God is creating a universe which is sufficiently dependable for us to live rationally, guided by our conscience.** But it's a universe which is not *absolutely* safe for us as a species.
2. **This universe is not of our making.** Any sense we may have of abiding ownership of even this small planet on which we temporarily live, both as individuals and as a species, is illusory.
3. **This universe has an order not of our making.** That order includes moral order. Any dignity and security we have comes from finding our place within that order.
4. **When we ignore that order, sooner or later we experience the universe as chaos** – even though the galaxies may continue on their ordered and predictable way.
5. **Any understanding of God which we seek to live by must not inflate our pride,** or tempt us to presume on God, or to use Him for our own purposes.
6. **God has to go deeper into the chaos than Noah ever did.** Alongside Jesus of Nazareth, Noah lacks something. And that's Incarnation, Death and Resurrection. (Now there's a Creation story to conjure with: the Cosmic Christ, Crucified and Risen, mastering cosmic chaos.)
7. **The Lord's Prayer stacks up pretty well in such a universe.**

Phyllis:

Sometimes it's said that Christianity is not a 'me and Jesus' religion, but an 'us and the Holy Trinity' religion. There's truth in this, and we want now to explore the themes of connectedness, relationship, interdependence, both within the Noah story and beyond.

Michelangelo, The Creation of Adam, 1508-12, fresco, Sistine ceiling, Vatican



When we turn to the Hebrew understanding of human identity found in Genesis and the whole Old Testament, we're in a world different from our present individualistic culture. For the Hebrews, a human being was 'an en-souled body in community'. Not 'an embodied soul', an 'en-souled body'. It's very earthy. A man or a woman is made of the earth, and has life-*nephesh*-'soul' breathed in by God. - and so too do other living creatures, all creations of the living God. Not that the other living creatures are put on the same level as humankind – the earth creature who is Adam (male and female) is made in God's image and given dominion over all other living creatures. This is why Michelangelo painted Adam on a mound of earth in this another fresco from the Sistine Chapel ceiling.

'An en-souled body *in community*.' There are connections everywhere, for good and ill. Connections with other living human beings. With generations, past and future. With other living creatures. And with the Living God. Thus there's a real common good rooted in the real world, not abstractly in our heads. When the connectedness is rightly ordered, safeguarded and served, *shalom* – peace, the blessedness of wholeness – is the fruit.

And peace is yoked to justice, *tsedeq*. The latter means not so much the impartial punishment of offenders but the restoration of 'right-connectedness', including social and economic. Social justice, the defence of the poor against the rich and powerful, is an integral part of God's justice, to be pursued by those who wield rightful authority. There can be no peace while some remain outside life-giving community. *'The forces of disorder, injustice, affliction and chaos...are, in the Israelite worldview, one.'*[Jon Levenson]

And the individual person? He or she remains personally responsible to God, but at the same time embodies the group in himself or herself. Punishment and reward are very collective.

Peter:

All this is assumed in the Noah story: the guilty connectedness of the generation washed away and the common fate most animals shared with them; the saving connectedness of righteous Noah with his immediate family (who presumably were no more innocent than their neighbours); the connectedness of the animals saved in the Ark with the saved human remnant; the connectedness of Noah with his God, a connectedness which his generation had lost. And then God's common covenant with Noah and his descendants - and with all living creatures, and with the Earth itself.

Note, however, that although God treats Noah as a new Adam and commands him and his sons to 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth', the clock isn't completely wound back to the Garden of Eden. Violent death has entered the biosphere and is not abolished by this new beginning. Human beings – vegetarian in Eden – are now given the animals to eat (though first the blood must be drained from them, for the blood, the life, belongs to God). Fear of humankind will rest on all other living creatures. (The later prophets reserve peace in the animal creation for the coming Messianic Age, when the lion shall eat straw like the ox.)

How does all this translate into the 21st Century?

1. It breaks open the individualist mind-set of our culture which deceives us into believing that each human person is completely autonomous. When we think like that, any notion of interdependence within a 'common good' is severely limited, and we find the basic concept of 'ecology' profoundly challenging. Not so in the Hebraic world-view.
2. There's an objective interconnectedness in the common good. We can mentally distinguish different aspects of that common good from one another, but that doesn't mean they are unconnected objectively. For example, in our heads we can distinguish ecological responsibility from social justice, but in the real world they remain connected, profoundly connected. The poor suffer most from climate change and environmental degradation.
3. Genesis and the Noah tradition within it are realistic about the food-chain and the hierarchies within that food-chain, including the dominant place we humans have. Whatever rights we give to animals – and reverence for them as creatures of God surely means they do have rights – all species don't have equal value.
4. We mustn't think only of our present interconnectedness in the web of life but also of intergenerational connectedness, both past and future. We live within the heritage of what former generations have bequeathed us, good and bad. And our present actions will affect for good or ill the **whole** interconnected world of the future. To live for myself alone or even for my blood descendants alone is to misunderstand radically the world I live in.
5. All this interconnectedness makes a lot of sense if God is Love.

Phyllis:

Is this a 'throw-away' world? Don't answer too quickly. I think the answer is yes and no. When we look at the history of Earth, its climates, currents and continents come and go, species appear and disappear. It's almost as though the Creator God experiments as He goes along.

Marc Chagall, Noah and the Rainbow, c. 1966, oil on canvas, 234 x 236 cm, Musée National Message Biblique, Marc Chagall, Nice, France



However, if the Noah story teaches us anything at all, it is that this is **not** essentially a 'throwaway' world, at least in God's eyes. The covenant which God makes with Noah and his descendants, with every other living creature, and with the Earth itself, is that God will never again 'send' a flood to destroy the life He has created. This covenant is universal in scope, unlike later covenants. Moreover, responding to the worship Noah offers Him after Noah leaves the Ark, God lifts his earlier curse on the ground, restoring its fertility and blessing. And *'as long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.'* God will live with the consequences of having created what He has created, including the wayward creature He has created in His own image. Before the Flood, in the words of Genesis 6:11, *'the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence.'* Has God **ever** seen anything about us humans different from this? For example, the 20th Century is being described as the most violent in human history – so far.

Yet God sees His rainbow, and 'remembers' his covenant with Noah. The rainbow is God's war-bow pointing **away** from the earth. Marc Chagall's 'Noah and the Rainbow' illustrates this well.

We Christians don't always grasp the deep significance of 'covenant' which under-girds the Jewish world-view. But to that Jewish understanding, we who are Christian have something to add. And that's the Passion of Christ, which shows how the God of the covenant responds to a world filled with corruption and violence, how God lives faithfully with the consequences of having created what He has created, including the wayward creature He has created in His own image.

Peter:

So God Himself will not destroy life on Earth. But would He permit us humans to damage the web of life on this planet irretrievably? I don't know. I can't appeal to any past covenant with a historical Noah, because I don't believe that happened – and anyway, that guaranteed God's actions, not those of humankind. I can however appeal to the character of the God revealed in the Noah story, and I do believe God is a covenant-making God who is faithful. I would have to throw both Testaments out the window to stop believing that. Yet we humans do now have the capability to destroy life by environmental irresponsibility or nuclear holocaust, and God does seem to have a sometimes worrying respect for human

freedom. So perhaps He **would** let us destroy life on Earth, and then sigh deeply, have a beer, and start again.

On the other hand, if we ourselves live in covenant with God, and 'covenantally' with one another and with the creatures of this incredible Earth, we are working with the grain of the universe. This isn't a 'throw-away' world. In God's mercy, there's a synergy, a positive linkage, between the moral order and the natural physical order. Between the moral order where we commit ourselves to treasure our fellow creatures and preserve the interconnectedness of life, and the physical order which our Creator God keeps establishing out of the chaos of physical potentialities. If we can take anything out of the Noah story, we can take that.

And so we start where we are. We are wise to view through the prism of holy 'covenant' all the present relationships we have: our relationships with our marriage partners (described as 'covenant' in our liturgies) and with our families; with our local community of faith; with our local living environment; with our nation. We are wise to revere and sacrificially nurture them. There's no room for warm fuzzies in authentic covenant relationships. Our own communities of faith, at every level, from family to congregation and beyond, must be oases of wholeness, shalom, in a disintegrating world, all within our overarching covenant with God.

Phyllis:

'All that God asks of us is to take the near edge of some great cause, and act at some cost to ourselves' [*Colin Morris*]. Covenant and Cross go together. And life flows from both. This is our hope.



***A presentation during worship in the Anglican Parish of Eastbourne on 20 November 2016
by Phyllis Mossman and Canon Peter Stuart.***