

## **HOMILY AND READINGS for the FOURTH SUNDAY of EASTER**

**(May 11th)**

### **THE READING FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT**

A reading from Genesis (7. 1-5, 11-18; 8. 6-18; 9. 8-13)

Then the Lord said to Noah, 'Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation. Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate; and seven pairs of the birds of the air also, male and female, to keep their kind alive on the face of all the earth. For in seven days I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.' And Noah did all that the Lord had commanded him.

In the six-hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. The rain fell on the earth for forty days and forty nights. On the very same day Noah with his sons, Shem and Ham and Japheth, and Noah's wife and the three wives of his sons, entered the ark, they and every wild animal of every kind, and all domestic animals of every kind, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, and every bird of every kind – every bird, every winged creature. They went into the ark with Noah, two and two of all flesh in which there was the breath of life. And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God had commanded him; and the Lord shut him in.

The flood continued for forty days on the earth; and the waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. The waters swelled and increased greatly on the earth; and the ark floated on the face of the waters.

At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent out the raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him. He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark; and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days, and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him any more.

In the six hundred and first year, in the first month, on the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from the earth; and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the face of the ground was drying. In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry. Then God said to Noah, 'Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh - birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth - so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth.' So Noah went out with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives.

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

This is the word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

### **THE NEW TESTAMENT READING**

A reading from Acts (9.36-43)

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, 'Please come to us without delay.'

So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, 'Tabitha, get up.' Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive.

This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

This is the word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

### **THE GOSPEL READING**

Listen to the Gospel of Christ according to St John (10.22-30)

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.'

Jesus answered, 'I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one.'

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

## HOMILY

by Rhiannon Johnson

The story of Noah and the Ark is one of the best known in the Bible, even to people who have no faith. Children play with toys of it. Any time someone proposes space ships to take us to another planet as an escape from environmental catastrophe, they are inevitably referred to as something like 'Space Arks'. Historians discuss which prehistoric flood might have inspired it and the other flood stories of the ancient Mediterranean. In church, however, for the most part, we don't talk much about it once we leave Sunday School. Why is that?

I can think of a few reasons- one is that, reading the story from the Bible takes more time than we normally allow for readings in church and, to make it a coherent story, requires some editing. The story, as it appears in Genesis, seems to be preserved in several overlapping versions which differ over significant details, like how many of each kind of animal went into the ark. That, in turn, raises all kind of questions of how this important book of the Bible was put together and the voices it preserves- all a bit complicated to get into in a short homily and in danger of over-complicating the scriptures status as the word of God that leads us to the Word of God, who is Jesus Christ.

Another reason we neglect the story in church may be that we find it morally problematic. It is not just the things that Noah the supposedly righteous man gets up to after he has come out of the ark. It is more that we cannot easily reconcile a God who commits a genocide with the God of love we know in Jesus Christ. We fear we would be drowning in the waters not among the righteous in the ark. We know we are saved, not by our own goodness, not by the goodness of our lives, but by the goodness and life of Jesus Christ and his generosity in letting us belong in him. Medieval plays of the story got around this by having Noah implore people to join him in the ark and they just laughed at him. Nonetheless, they were given a chance. These plays often also turn Noah's wife into a comedy drunk who has to be dragged into the ark, thereby implying there is a place in God's salvation for people who are less than perfect.

Sometimes, we rewrite the meaning of the story altogether. If you watch the 2007 film *Evan Almighty* the 'God' figure in that explains the word 'ark' as Acts of Random Kindness and explains it as a love story- they went into the ark two by two, as if it is our marriages and our small good deeds that bring salvation. And don't even get me started on the 2014 Noah film with Russell Crowe...

Nonetheless, the Bible story does have a strong message for us. If God's mercy and God's judgement ever oppose each other, the mercy wins out. God has promised not to destroy the world again as a way of dealing with the problem of human sinfulness. (This of course says nothing about whether human sinners are capable of destroying it for themselves without God's help). Even at his most vengeful, God could not ignore Noah's

attempts to please him and the merciful response of God to those efforts saved not only Noah but also his family and all the great diversity of animal life.

There is a lovely Jewish story that while Noah collected the animals his wife, who the tale names as Hamath, collected the seeds of every different type of plant. She wrapped them all in her apron and, when the ark came to land, she threw the contents of her apron up in the air for the wind to carry to good soil and a new beginning.

Remember *Genesis* is the book of beginnings. Its stories define for us some of the most crucial things we know about God and human beings. Firstly, God creates. We are given two accounts of what that creation may have looked like but this only underlies the message that God is creator and we are his creations. Secondly, we learn that human beings are capable, even cursed with, making decisions and not all decisions are good, maybe especially when it comes to how to please God. We see that even Adam's sons get into a murderous conflict over which of them is more favored by God. We learn that we have freedom and that freedom can be abused, so will the God who created and blessed use that same power to also curse and destroy? The Noah story preserves God's freedom but also assures us of his mercy. God tried destruction and decided he had no taste for it. He chooses the slow and difficult path of love instead that, we now know, leads to the cross and the empty tomb and a world renewed and restored in Jesus Christ.

Over the Christian centuries, we have also used the story in another way. In our Cathedral in St Davids, you will see the ark prominently in the round window above the font. The church, baptism and the ark are all linked visually together. The main way of reading the Old Testament, through most of the last twenty centuries for Christians has been searching it for 'types' and 'antitypes' - stories that image for us something we need to know about faith, particularly who Jesus is, or things we need to avoid.

In this 'typical' reading of the Noah story, the Ark prefigures the Church, baptism is like getting on the ark and being saved from being drowned in the sinful world that is passing away. In the ark/church, however, we must be prepared for the fact that not everyone is like us. There are all kinds of animals, some clean, some unclean. Living in the ark/church is not easy, but it is the vehicle that, we pray, brings us safe through this stormy life until we land in the fullness of God's kingdom. Our prayers are like the birds sent out, sometimes coming back to us, sometimes disappearing from us to only God knows where, sometimes coming back to us with signs of God's love and peace and hope. The crucial thing is to keep on sending them out.

It is easy, both as a child and as an adult, to get hung up on the flood, but the direction of the story is not about destruction but about redemption. It is meant to assure us of the same love and belonging that Jesus speaks about in the Gospel reading. We belong to God in Jesus Christ. We are people of his creation. We are sinners of his redeeming.

We are children of hope in his promises. Nothing this world can do can snatch us away from him.

So, when you reread the story as an adult, do give time to thank God that even though you feel yourself to be a very strange beast indeed, there is a place on the ark for you and even for another like you. But most of all, praise God for choosing the hard road of love and choosing mercy over vengeance and pray that all your life, you may choose to do the same.

### **COLLECT OF THE DAY**

Almighty God, your Son Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life: raise us, who trust in him, from the death of sin to the life of righteousness, that we may seek those things which are above, where he reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.  
**Amen.**