

Easter 4, Eucharist

Genesis 7: 1-5,11-18, Acts 9:36-end, John 10: 22-30

Mother Emma

The story of Noah's Flood is perhaps one of the best-known stories in the Bible, immortalised in toys, decorations for nursery walls, and on the covers of most illustrated editions of the Bible for children.

Almost all of us can sing "the animals went in two by two for to keep out of the rain"! Yet cute as the thought of the pairs of animals may be, the story of Noah is in fact dark and frightening – God is so incensed by the wickedness of the human race which he has created that he decides:

*'I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.'*

However, amongst the wickedness of humanity was Noah, a righteous man, blameless in his generation, who walked with God, and God decided to spare the life of Noah and his family, together with a pair of every animal he had created.

Once they were all safely installed in the ark, God did indeed blot out every living thing on the face of the earth, leaving only Noah, and those with him in the ark. I remember once at a Sunday School class watching children happily drawing pictures of Noah's ark, having listened carefully to the story, as we did just now.

Most concentrated on the water, the animals' faces at the windows, Noah and his wife standing precariously on the deck, but two boys, I suddenly realised, were studiously drawing the corpses of drowned people and animals floating past on the waves.

Although faintly freaked out by this, I was conscious that this was an entirely accurate representation of the story, as God blotted out all life from the earth he had created, in punishment for their wickedness.

Yet he contemplated this terrible destruction, God placed a rainbow in the sky as a covenant with humankind that he will never wipe them out again.

God's covenant with us is renewed in the person of Christ, and continues through the sacraments of the Church, and today we come together to witness the baptisms of Margret, Alice, Theo and George, remembering that this act of baptism has formed a central part of Christian faith since the baptism of Jesus himself in the river Jordan.

A third-century Christian bishop known as St Gregory Thaumaturgus, or Gregory the Miracle-Worker, wrote of the story of Christ's baptism that Jesus represents the new Noah.

We see the stories mirroring one another in the water and the voice of God, and Gregory connected the dove which settles on Jesus as he comes up out of the River Jordan with the dove which returns to Noah to assure him that the flood is past and that they are safe.

Yet the stories of Noah and Jesus, the "new Noah", are diametrically opposed.

In the narrative of the Flood, God's grief and anger at the wickedness of humanity, and its failure to walk in his ways, lead him to his terrible decision to destroy all life.

In Christ, however, God sends not death, but a self-sacrificial love which can redeem men and women, and bring them new life, however much they have turned away from him.

Jesus, through his life, his teaching, his ministry, Death and Resurrection, reveals a loving and merciful God, who remains true to his promise that he will never destroy life on earth again.

However literally or allegorically we understand the story of Noah's Flood, its message for us is clear. The God who called into being the universe and everything in it, who gave life to us and to all the created order, has the power to cause such destruction that life would cease.

Yet, in Christ, the very Word of God who acted with him in the beginning of Creation, he offers us a chance to experience unfailing love and mercy.

In baptism, the element of water, which serves such a grim purpose in the story of Noah, becomes the water of life, which cleanses us of all our sins, bestowing on us the free gift of God's love and grace, and encouraging us to grow and thrive in faith.

Today Alice, George, Margret and Theo will be washed in this water of life. On their behalf, their parents and godparents will renounce the sins which separate us from God and neighbour and will turn to Christ as their Saviour.

For his part, God pours upon them the riches of his love and grace, just as he did at Jesus' own baptism.

Our prayer for George, Margret, Theo and Alice is that they will continue to follow in Jesus' steps, held safely within the love of God and walking in the companionship of his people.

This day in the Church calendar is often known as Good Shepherd Sunday, and we heard in our Gradual the familiar words of Psalm 23, "The Lord is my Shepherd", with that comforting and inspiring verse, "*Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*"

In our Gospel reading, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, referred to his sheep, who hear his voice and follow him.

It is perhaps in the words he speaks next where we see the clearest reversal of the story of Noah's Flood.

Christ makes clear the promise for all who follow him:

*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.*

Of course, no one can promise that Theo, Alice, George and Margret will, as the result of the promises and the sacrament we shall witness here today, live lives untouched by sadness or difficulty.

But we can be certain that through everything they face, God's goodness and mercy will follow, comfort and sustain them, and that from today on, no-one can snatch them out of Christ's hand.

Amen.