

Rainbow Covenant: a sermon on Genesis 9: 8-17 Mark 1: 9-15

by Rev Phil Wootton – Sunday 21st February, 2021

Rainbows are phenomena of wonder. Rainbows are stunning in their beauty and mystery, unexpected in their appearance, illusory at their ending – we never have found that pot of gold! They seem to span from earth to heaven and back to earth. Caused by the refraction of sunlight through raindrops, somehow they have an almost mystical capacity to lift our spirits and stir up hope. It's not surprising in these most challenging of times that the rainbow has been co-opted as a sign of support for the NHS and a symbol of hope. The rainbow says, there will be a future.

In Genesis 9, God gives the rainbow as a sign of the covenant – the binding promise – God makes with Noah never to flood the earth again. During Lent, our Old Testament readings will tell of the different covenants God made – with Abraham, with Moses, with David, and through Jeremiah – each made with an individual through whom there will be a blessing. This first covenant is different. It is with Noah, his sons and daughters, their sons and daughters, to every generation; and it is with every living thing God has placed on the planet – birds, livestock, wild animals, everything. God's loving mercy applies for all, and for ever. Sometimes, when we read the later covenants with Israel, we may wonder, what about the rest of the world? Well, this first covenant shows God's saving purposes are for the whole planet. His saving work will be focused through one people, Israel, and ultimately one person, Jesus Christ, and it will be for all creation. Let's go back to Noah. We join the story when the flood waters have receded. The submerged landscape has been revealed. The ark has come to rest on Mount Ararat and Noah has released the animals. He has built an altar and offered his worship to God and God has given his blessing. Genesis 9 begins with words first heard in the garden of Eden: 'in the image of God, God has made human beings,' and, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.' It's like going back to the beginning, like a re-booting of creation. With it, we are reminded how God made every creature of air, sea and land; and how, in the story of Noah, God had insisted Noah collect and save representatives of every species of animal and bird. Now, five or six times in this passage, it's repeated: the covenant is with every living thing – and the covenant is sealed with a rainbow.

The echoes from Eden remind us also of the first calling of human beings: to be stewards of all that God has made; to care for creation alongside the Creator. Inevitably, we also think about how we continually mess it up. Noah does it straight away. With the rainbow only fading from the mind's eye, Noah's first act of stewardship is to plant a vineyard. He goes on to harvest the grapes, make wine and immediately get drunk on it, shamefully exposing his nakedness. When he wakes up from his drunken stupor, he blames his son for looking at him when he was drunk and naked, and helping him, and curses him into slavery. The flood may have been a cleansing event, but human nature remains as stubbornly sinful as ever.

Today it is to our human shame that we we fail to share God's care for his planet. Genesis gives us stories of bio-diversity – the amazing variety of creation and God through Noah going out on a limb to save every species. If our call is to share with God in caring for his creation, then our crime is that our lifestyles are wiping out that biodiversity. We've heard figures all too often: in the UK alone, over 500 species lost in recent decades, with 1400 more endangered, and worldwide one million under threat. The causes are equally well-known – habitat-loss (either direct or through climate-change); invasive species introduced by humans; pollution of air, soil or water; and the tensions caused by population growth and over-consumption. We need to make a new covenant that we will never again destroy God's creation.

We've learnt before of the huge efforts required at every level. Now the immediate problems of pandemic cause us to take our eye off the environmental ball. But we must continue to press forward, knowing creation care is central to the role and calling of the Christian. In terms of specific action, there's so much that we can do individually, but let me remind you of just one – the so-called LOAF principles for food-shopping: that's Local, Organic, Animal-welfare and Fairtrade. I know it's not always possible, but where we have choices these are ones that contribute significantly to biodiversity. When we take them, we echo God's covenant with every living creature.

How does all this fit in with the Gospel? At the start of Lent we always remember Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness that inspire our 40 days of Lenten devotions.

The Judean desert to which Jesus went is a place of great beauty, best enjoyed early in the morning, before the heat gets ferocious. In the highlands of Judea, it is not flooding but the encroaching desert that threatens life. Jesus endures this threatening environment. He endures the danger of wild animals. He endures the testing of the mind inflicted by the devil. The Son of God is never above all the difficulties. Indeed, it is through hardship, rejection and suffering that he will show who he truly is.

Last year, during our first lock-down, a comment was doing the rounds: 'This is the Lentiest Lent I have ever Lented.' In 2021 it may be more so. If Lent is about giving up something we enjoy, then under lock-down we are forced to give up so much (before we even think of chocolates!) But the real question is how much we have learned: Have we spent the time with God? Have we reflected on who we truly are, the person God has made us to be? Have we sought out the calling God has for us, both for this time, and for the future? Have we included in this our call to care for God's creation?

We started with rainbows. Jesus' baptism might be called his 'rainbow moment.' Bursting up out of the river, scattering water droplets everywhere – you can imagine a rainbow effect around him. But more importantly, at that moment, heaven and earth are connected in his person. The heavens are ripped apart as the Holy Spirit descends like a dove and the voice of the Father affirms him as beloved Son. In him, the Covenant between God and creation is renewed. Hope has come again.