

How many sheep went into the Ark? It's a good pub quiz question...because the answer is 14. (Chapter 7 .2: 7 pairs of clean animals were on the Ark). This story is incredibly well known, yet it has the capacity to surprise, and it should both make us think and shock us too.

The Flood story is shared with various religions and peoples of the ancient world. There clearly was a catastrophic event at some point, probably due to Ice Age melting in modern Turkey and the Black Sea, and different peoples reflected on it in their literature. Just look up 'Gilgamesh' on Google when you get back.

What's shocking here is the ancient Jews' belief that a natural disaster might be the active will of an angry God. What is awe inspiring is God's initiative in ensuring that such an event would never happen again. This is the story of the presence of forgiveness, of love and of God's reaching out to a wayward creation with everything we need to find hope. 'I will remember my covenant...the waters shall never again become a flood to cover the earth'. (Genesis 9. 15)

God promised that Noah that never again would a people be abandoned to destruction because of sinful behaviour. Whenever storm clouds gathered the rainbow would be a reminder that God's contract, agreement, solemn undertaking, covenant was for evermore. Never again would there be unavoidable judgement. God would always offer the possibility of rescue. Even when it seemed like God had abandoned his people, he would always keep his side of the bargain. This is a story about intimate love and hope, not malevolent violence. And when we see the power of the natural world, we should rejoice that in Genesis what we see is God's good creation, and God's promise that his love and care go beyond natural disaster and human wrong-doing.

One of the ways to understand God's gift of his eternal Son in Jesus, the Word made flesh, is the fulfilment of this eternal covenant. God's agreement with Noah was about 'all flesh' – the whole world. His covenant with Abraham was that Abraham's descendants would be the peoples from whom salvation for the world would be found. Paul, the faithful Jew, saw when he was converted and met with Christ raised from the dead that Jesus was the fulfilment of both of these covenants, and that the world would be rescued through Christ. In everything which challenges humanity today Jesus is shown to be the answer, the rescue, the hope and the future.

I hope it is not too fanciful to say that, in the terms of Genesis 9, Jesus is both the rainbow – the sign of God's presence with us, and the ark, the means of rescue. But I have used the word 'covenant' a lot, and if you know your legal and biblical language then a covenant, a contract, is between two parties. The offering of the covenant is God's initiative, and God will not let down his side of the bargain. We are invited to play our part. To use the imagery of the equally well known parable of the Sower, it is God who offers the seed, but we who can ensure that we are fertile ground for the seed to grow and bear fruit.

So: be glad that the God who 'touches the mountains and they smoke' (to quote the psalmist) is bound not to destroy us. Be in awe that God's initiative to the world is love.

And be determined to offer all that you can to ensure that God's life grows in you. If you have ears to hear, listen.