

## Honley Parish Church and Brockholes S. George

25.vi.2017 – Genesis vii.6-end

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Those of you who came to the *Water of Life* study day in March will remember hearing Mary Dhonau. Mary spoke very movingly about her experience of numerous occasions on which her house in Worcester has been flooded with foul water. This is what she says about what it is like:

‘Having being flooded myself, I know how awful it is. I had a newly diagnosed severely autistic son just as I was flooded. Next door to me lived an agoraphobic lady who hadn’t left her house in years, and the next house along an elderly lady who had been recently bereaved and lost all her photos. The compounded grief they went through was worse than mine, we all have horrible things going on in our lives and flood water just finishes you off. When I saw everyone’s sheer misery I thought this is not on, I’ve got to raise the plight of the flood victim at every level. Something in me was fired up and I got significant success fairly quickly.’

Compounded grief, and sheer misery – that’s what Mary Dhonau says being flooded is like. So it is hardly surprising that when the biblical writers want to communicate the very worst that can happen to the world, they use the motif of flooding. That’s what we find in Genesis vii, from which we heard our first reading this morning. The world is portrayed as being full of wickedness: ‘every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time’ (Genesis vi.5). And the result is

divine judgement: ‘The LORD said, “I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created – and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground”’ (Genesis vi.7). How does God do that? By means of a flood. If you want an image for destruction, this is it.

So, first: *The Judgement of God*. We’ve seen how this flood is a response to the world being full of wickedness. Now we see how all-consuming it is: vii.11, 12: ‘In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, on the seventeenth day of the second month – on that day all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened. And rain fell on the earth for forty days and forty nights.’ And notice how the writer piles up the references to the destruction the flood brings: ‘Every living thing that moved on land perished – birds, livestock, wild animals, all the creatures that swarm over the earth, and all mankind. Everything on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died. Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out: people and animals and the creatures that move along the ground and the birds were wiped from the earth....’ This is devastation on a literally world-shattering scale. We saw last week, in the first chapter of Genesis, how at the beginning there was a watery void, and the water was a place of confusion and disorder. Now, we see what happens when the restraining power of God is removed.

And so the first thing we learn from this devastating flood is how desperate the world’s predicament is. The world is so helpless in what we might call its ‘natural state’ that disaster and

death on epic proportions is entirely possible. It might feel as if we have had a glimpse of that in our own country in recent weeks – having witnessed the tragic possibilities of human evil in Manchester and at London Bridge; and the tragic possibilities of human fallibility and weakness at Grenfell Tower in North Kensington. And then there are the ‘everyday’ tragedies we read about every day. This morning’s BBC news website tells us about a cholera outbreak in Yemen, the attempted rape of an eight-year old girl, the denial of the rights of gay and lesbian people in Turkey, and the death of 120 people from a fire in an oil tanker in Pakistan. Little wonder, then, that in one of the strands that makes up this flood story in Genesis, God wants to start again with his creating work. The world’s predicament is so desperate that sometimes a universal flood seems perfectly tenable, proportionate, and even, perhaps, just.

But the second thing we learn from this universal flood is the extent of God’s authority. ‘Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out.’ This story of a flood is a story that belongs to God’s people Israel. The surrounding nations worshipped their own gods, who were generally associated with their particular land. But Israel’s God is the universal God, the creator of all things, whose power and authority is without limit. He is the sovereign God. ‘All the high mountains under the entire heavens were covered.’ There is nothing which does not ultimately yield to his authority.

And that might be the end of the matter. The world is full of sadness and wickedness, and God has universal power to deal with it – a power we see startlingly displayed in this flood epic

in Genesis. But that isn’t the end of the matter, because as well as telling us about the judgement of God, this story tells us about the preservation of life.

Secondly: *The Preservation of Life*. First, God protects his people. There is a man on whom righteousness has been bestowed – a man who who walks faithfully with God. His name, of course, is Noah. And he has three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. And each of them has a wife. This righteous family becomes the focus of God’s saving activity, as they are preserved from the effects of the flood. God reveals to them what he is going to do. God protects them from the devastation. And God makes them, in the end, the fathers and mothers of us all. Here we see God’s love: not a general, widely diffused love, but a particular love for particular people; a distinguishing love for distinct people.

It is the same love we see at the cross. When Jesus died, he died not simply to make forgiveness possible for anyone who happens to want it, but rather to achieve forgiveness for every single one of his people. He died in your place and mine – a representative and substitute for individuals. God’s love is not like some sort of natural law, spread thinly so everyone gets a little bit. It is rather particular and specific, to you and to me. God saves his people.

This salvation of Noah and his family is a foretaste of the salvation God is bringing to the world in Jesus Christ. As you read through the Bible, the focus of God’s saving love becomes wider and wider. It begins with this one family. Then a promise

is made to Abraham, that God will bless his descendants. They become a great nation. Promises are made to this nation that the saving love they experience will one day be experienced by the whole world. Those promises are fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who reveals God uniquely and definitively. His life, death and resurrection are the means by which God saves the world from the destruction which would otherwise be its end. And so the promise God sets before us as his people is of a new creation from which everything that spoils the world will be absent. That is where the world is heading – and we see a glimpse of it in the preservation of life.

You see, the focus of this flood story is not on the devastation which is caused. It is rather on the promise God makes at the end of the story. God says, 'I establish my covenant with you: never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.' And the sign of that covenant is the rainbow. God says, 'Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.'

Floods are disastrous. They have the power to create untold misery. Little wonder, then, that the biblical writers use the image of a flood to tell us about death and destruction. But God is the God who saves. He saves Noah and his family, and he makes a promise which he keeps in Jesus Christ – to save his people, and to bring about a new creation. To him be glory now and for ever.