

Thought for the Week 6th September 2020

Genesis chapter 8 v 13-22

¹³ In the six hundred and first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried from off the earth. And Noah removed the covering of the ark and looked, and behold, the face of the ground was dry. ¹⁴ In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth had dried out. ¹⁵ Then God said to Noah, ¹⁶ “Go out from the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. ¹⁷ 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—that they may swarm on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth.” ¹⁸ So Noah went out, and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives with him. ¹⁹ Every beast, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out by families from the ark.

²⁰ Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. ²¹ And when the LORD smelt the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, “I will never again curse^[a] the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. ²² While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”

Noah and his family and all the representatives of the created order are floating in the ark – the only survivors of a devastating flood which had destroyed a sinful world. Then God recalls the waters to their boundaries to establish once again the order of this world. In an echo of Genesis 1:6 the waters separate from the earth and dry land appears. Once more the animals and birds are set free on the earth to be fruitful and multiply. Once again God establishes personal communion with human beings made in his image. The powerful forces which brought such fear and devastation, once again bring life and refreshment to a restored creation.

What has this story to say to us today as we begin to emerge from a world-wide pandemic? The coronavirus which has brought so much trouble is not in any way a direct parallel to God's judgement on a sinful world. But there are things which speak to us today.

Notice first that the re-emergence from the ark was gradual. If you go back to the beginning of Genesis chapter 8 v 1-3 you will see that first the wind came, then the rain stopped and the waters began to recede. But this all took time which I am sure was a time of great uncertainty and no doubt frustration for Noah and his family. Then he sent out a raven and a dove, but it was a long time before the dove didn't return because it had found somewhere to land. Even then Noah stayed inside the ark for another 2 months.

We too are no doubt frustrated by the length of time it has taken to get back to some degree of normality after the lockdown and there are still many uncertainties with the threat of an Autumn spike which may put us back further again. But you know, God has his timing – and it's usually much

slower than ours – especially considering the hectic pace of modern-day life. As the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow put it:

“Though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small; Though with patience He stands waiting, with exactness grinds He all.”

We thank God that he has brought us thus far today, but perhaps he has more to teach us as we emerge from this time of pandemic.

In verse 17 God instructs Noah to bring out all the living creatures so that they can “multiply on the earth and be fruitful and multiply in number upon it.” The world was stripped back, but now as they re-emerge from the ark, the core aspects of life are to recommence. For us church life has been stripped back, and the big question is, what are the core aspects of church life that should recommence and continue as before? If we are to be fruitful and multiply (and isn’t that the last thing Jesus told us to do before he ascended back to heaven?) does that mean we go back to doing the same old, same old that we did before, or are we being given a unique opportunity to re-think all that we have done? Are there previous church activities that just don’t feel so important as before? Are there exciting new opportunities for us in a world where people have been shaken from their complacency in a materialistic world?

These are important questions which we will be considering urgently in the coming months, in case we just slip comfortably into old routines.

The story of Noah emerging from the Ark is, however, a word of hope to us God’s people as we emerge from a period of fear and devastation, such as has not been known in our lifetimes or for a long period previous? The story of Noah reminds us that God is the sovereign Lord who decrees all things and orders them in a way which we can never hope to fathom, is also the intimate and gracious God who saves us.

I repeat the question I asked the boys and girls. “What was the first thing Noah did when he emerged from the ark?” The boat builder now takes some stones and builds an altar. He kneels down in the mud and offers worship to God. Noah’s first response is gratitude and expresses it by offering a sacrifice, realising his need to divine grace. Why a sacrifice, you might ask? Why sacrifice one of those precious animals that had survived the time in the ark? By the way there were not just 2 but 7 of the “clean animals” (the ones suitable for sacrifice) taken into the ark – check out Genesis 7:2. By this Old Testament practice of sacrifice the people of God learned that life-giving was the principal if life. It is through life laid down that life can flourish.

Ultimately, of course, this all looks forward to the New Testament and the ultimate sacrifice of the lamb of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who died on the cross as a willing sacrifice paying the price for our sin, so that in the grace of God we can be forgiven and restored to fellowship with God.

So today, our first priority must be that of Noah, to offer our worship and thanksgiving to our gracious, sovereign, saving God.