

Noah/the Ark of the New Covenant

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+ In a week of unimaginable tragedy in the waters of the Mediterranean, with the loss of hundreds of lives, paradoxically the account of Noah and his Ark in the book of Genesis tells a very different story. A story of survival, it has a happy ending, which includes every living creature. Which is perhaps the reason why virtually every pre-school nursery, playgroup and reception class is equipped with a wooden Ark, countless pairs of animals, Noah and his family. We all know the story of Noah's Ark – the construction of a huge ship, the animals going in two by two, the flood, the dove coming back with an olive branch when the waters had receded and then the beautiful rainbow in the sky. It's a good story that has even inspired film makers very recently, a bonus in these politically correct times being that it's a story held in common by all the monotheistic faiths and many more besides, not so much because it's a good story, but rather because it conveys complex generic spiritual truths in a highly symbolic, understandable way.

Thankfully we live in an age which encourages understanding of the scriptures, and permits us to question the literal text of the Bible. So once we've moved on from playing with the Ark and identifying the animals, we naturally start to wonder: What were people doing that was so bad God had to destroy everything? It seems unlikely that Noah was actually the only one who was found to be righteous. And how could anyone build such a huge vessel, especially so long ago? Was there really a flood and did it cover the whole earth? Does Mt Ararat actually exist and was the wood discovered on a mountaintop the remnants of the Ark? How did Noah feed the animals and how did he muck them out? Why didn't the cats eat the mice, the lions eat Noah? In the film I saw, the animals were conveniently put into a deep sleep. But to linger on these questions is to miss the point; in the account of Noah and his Ark something much deeper than practical implausibility is being conveyed to us. Moving forward centuries, and Jesus Christ would have been familiar with the underlying meaning of this story and in today's Gospel, using different metaphors, he builds on the details from Genesis.

But before looking at the story of Noah in more detail, there's a poem by the contemporary Ealing poet Godfrey Rust, which spans centuries and faiths, subtly linking the ark with the cross:

The ark sailed backwards through the centuries
beyond the reach of modern scholarship: Einstein

discovered nothing to which it was related, Galileo
failed to trace its course in the stars, da Vinci

could only speculate on its design, Columbus
was the boldest, with the least successful result –

and when it was found at last,
by the shepherds acting on a tip off,

it was much smaller than we had imagined, just
a wooden box, with a few beasts attending,

hardly adequate, you'd think, for the deliverance
of all humanity from the flood of judgement,

its single occupant asleep, and over all the covenant
sign,
not a rainbow but Golgotha, the soul's true Ararat.

So let's consider the ark, the water and the rainbow: The word 'ark', as the poem hints, doesn't translate as a ship, or a boat. The poem tells us: 'and when it was found at last, by the shepherds on a tip off, it was much smaller than we had imagined, just a wooden box, with a few beasts attending.' A better translation of ark would be a box, a container – like a manger - or even the protective husk which encases a seed or a bulb. The ark then, protects the life it contains: Noah and his family and every created thing. This precious cargo needed protection because it held the hope for the future life of a world which had gone awry, God's creation which needed to be cleansed of all evil, washed clean by the waters of the great flood.

The waters of the flood in Genesis did finally recede and as a sign of his covenant with Noah and his descendants – his agreement with Noah that this would never happen again – as a sign of this covenant God placed a rainbow in the sky, an arc of refracted light, containing all the colours of the earth. And as anyone who has ever tried will know, it's impossible to find the beginning or the end of a rainbow, a symbolic reminder that God is everlasting, he was in the beginning before the earth was formed and he will be at the end of time. The eternal dimension of God is a mystery which, like the beginning and end of a rainbow, we will never fathom.

In between its unknown point of beginning and ending, the bow of a rainbow contains all the colours there are, symbolising everything that has life in our colourful world: all people, all things. So from this we understand that God's covenant with Noah and his descendants was inclusive, nothing living was excluded from this new beginning as life spilt out from the protection of the ark into the new world, devoid of sin and washed clean.

Predictably of course the squeaky clean world didn't stay that way for ever; the stain of the sin that had been washed away by the flood returned, and fast forwarding a few millennia, we find that mankind had once again taken God's creative, self-giving love for granted. Once again our sins were separating us from God, and the gulf which lay between us and our creator, was being filled by the unscrupulous, the corrupt, the evil, the people traffickers of the ancient world. But however hopeless the situation, God our Creator never gives up on us, and this time when he chose a new ark, it wasn't a mythical ship but a human body. The protective husk surrounding the seed of life, the hope for the future, was the womb of Mary, the Mother of God. Once again the life of the world, the hope for the future, emerged from water – the waters of human birth. Which is just one explanation of why Mary is often referred to as the ark of the New Covenant.

This New Covenant was completely different because this time God offered himself as the Covenant, he wasn't trusting in flawed humanity as he had with Noah and his descendants. As God's Son, the person of Christ was the new covenant - a human body yet fully divine - this new covenant was everlasting and unlike the rainbow, Jesus wasn't something to be looked at in the sky, he was a walking, talking person who shared our humanity on earth.

The rainbow symbolising the covenant with Noah was refracted light – in order to appear, rainbows need water and the light of the sun. With the birth of Jesus Christ the true light, the living water had come into the world, the light which shines in the darkness. The waters of baptism, which give life.

As was so evident in the centuries after the flood, human beings will continue to sin, but never again need we be separated from God, because Jesus died once and for all in order to reconcile us with the Father. He bore our sins on the cross so that we might live - as it says in the Book of Acts 'There is salvation in no one else'. We are washed clean through the waters of baptism, and through the shedding of his blood on the cross we are assured of God's forgiveness.

The salvation offered through Jesus Christ is for all time and for all people. In his lifetime he was already looking beyond the small gathering of followers to a far more all-encompassing, inclusive audience. Jesus the Good Shepherd told us not only that he would lay down his life for his sheep, but also that he has other sheep, that do not belong to this fold. Jesus came to offer salvation to the whole world and perhaps as we look out at the human tide of misery floating on the waters of the Mediterranean, the victims of greed, dishonest regimes, violence and corruption, we should remember the hope offered by the rainbow in the sky so long ago, that the waters of destruction will recede and that the salvation Jesus promised through the New Covenant is for absolutely everyone, forever and ever. Amen.