

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

Reflection – 4th Sunday of Easter – 25th April 2021

Reader Christine Portman

We were chatting recently with a friend from the village. Michel's a highly-intelligent man. He's spent his life travelling the world for the UN and other agencies, a good man who's stayed focused on giving what he can to help others less fortunate than himself. So, when we were talking about the environmental problems now facing the planet, I was shocked to hear him say, "Life's just too complex now. We've gone beyond the point of no return".

Today, as is usual in Eastertide, our first reading might have been from Acts, so I'd intended to say nothing about the alternative Old Testament text – one which I'm sure you all know very well. But apart from my conversation with Michel, many things have happened recently to tell me that I couldn't ignore Noah and his Ark. I'd talked on it last May, just at the point when we were starting to come out of lockdown when the parallels of being cooped up and then liberated felt very significant. But here's the beauty of scripture: we're a year down the line, and new aspects of the story are coming to the fore. As the Book of Common Prayer puts it: "the Scripture moveth us in sundry places". The story of the Ark enriches and complements what we learn this morning about the first apostles in Acts and about Jesus as our Good Shepherd.

So what were those things that moved me to include Noah's story? First, Jane and I, with Jamie and Roxana spent several hours online last week at the Synod for the Archdeaconry of France, where a session was devoted to how we might become an "Eco Diocese". Then, on Monday, some of us were back on Zoom again for a Diocese in Europe conference entitled "Caring for Creation". World leaders met this week with Joe Biden to discuss how we are to deal with the huge challenges that face us. Not only has the British government just decided to bring forward its

climate change targets, General Synod has committed us as a Church to be Net Zero by 2030 – and this includes our own diocese. That’s just nine years from now.

Environmental issues aren’t solely limited to climate change and David Attenborough has done a much better job than I could ever do in flagging up the myriad problems we face, so I won’t spend time telling you what you already know. Instead, let’s look at what today’s readings have to tell us about our responsibilities as stewards of God’s creation. If you take another look at the story of the Ark after this service, you’ll see that as God sets his bow in the clouds, He makes it a sign *“between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations a sign of the covenant between me and the earth”* Genesis 9. 9-13. In the very first chapter of the Bible, God tells Adam that he will *“have dominion”* over all living things. God judges his creation as *good*, but we humans are to care for it. Genesis begins with creation, moves to a time of almost complete disaster for humankind, but then sees renewal through Noah and his descendants. As Ezekiel writes: *“Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Lord God. Wouldn’t I prefer that he turn from his ways and live?”* Ezekiel 18.23. As we face challenges on so many fronts, what ways are we being called to turn from so that we may live?

In the online conference on Eco Diocese, we were reminded of the Anglican Communion’s Five Marks of Mission. Perhaps we don’t look at them enough:

The mission of the Church is the mission of Christ

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth

For Christians, caring for God’s Creation is not an optional extra: it’s God’s work. We know how *unjust structures* and unsustainable living are multiplying the problems we face. As John Rogerson says in his commentary on *The Flood: Part of the order of creation is also the moral order, and the Old Testament is clear that*

disruption of the moral order can affect the natural order; which is why God brings the flood upon the earth; to destroy the destructive creature, humanity, whose evil undermines the created order.

These are hard words – but God does forewarn the righteous Noah, and through this one obedient man, who endured all the taunts of his scoffing neighbours, humanity is preserved. Perhaps in recent years, too many of us have been more like the disciples in the days following the crucifixion. But look at them in today’s reading from Acts: they’re quite transformed. They’ve left their self-imposed isolation and are out on the streets, speaking openly and healing in Jesus’ name. Although prisoners, they stand confidently in front of the High Priest and his priestly clique, ready to declare loud and clear that their work is being done in the name of Jesus. Not only that, fearless Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, is ready to rebuke them for having crucified our Lord: This Jesus is *“the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone”*. Are we ready, like them, to say *Rulers of the people and elders* – things have to change, and ready, in the name of Jesus, to bring healing to a sick world. Are we ready, like Noah, to go out on a limb from all those who don’t seem to care and say, “No, we’ll do what God is asking us to do”?

Many ideas were floated in the Eco Diocese conference about the practical steps we might all take. One which struck me was plans to co-operate with *Climate Stewards*, an organization aiming to offset by doing positive good – for example, providing smokeless stoves to people in rural Nepalese communities. People die from carbon monoxide poisoning. The need to collect wood – hard, physical work - often prevents children from going to school and at the same time it’s causing real environmental damage. A simple step like that responds *to human need by loving service whilst striving to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth*. I’ve put a link to the *Climate Stewards* website below. There are so many ways we can, are, and will be contributing to change. We know what personal steps we’re taking to change our own behaviour, so let’s be proud of that and determine to go further. This morning we might have read from 1 John, Chapter 3 instead of Genesis. He writes:

“We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses

help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him". 1 John 3. 16-24.

The Lord is our Good Shepherd. Of his own accord, he has laid down his life for us – his love is *love in truth and action*. The French love to talk about *solidarité* but this is infinitely more. We must never give in to the negativity of “Life’s just too complex now. We’ve gone beyond the point of no return”. Whatever we may face, our faith in him means that we can have total confidence that his *goodness and love will follow* us all the days of our lives.

So in that confidence and in faith, let’s reflect on our mission as Church, serving the world in this present time. Who knows? Perhaps when, as a whole church, we *respond to human need by loving service, when we work to transform unjust structures of society, to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth, when we speak truth and show it in action, our Christian voice will be heard loud and clear. As 1 John says: we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.*

Amen

<https://www.climatestewards.org/>