

Sermon for 12 September 2021

Caring for Creation - with Noah!

1. A problem and a solution

Please read Genesis 6.5-22.

Over the next three weeks we're working through the story of Noah and seeing what it might tell us about caring for creation – in particular, the climate crisis. Why Noah? Well, there's a great flood in the story, and that's one of the effects of climate change – either too little water or too much water. Many parts of the world are already experiencing those things due to climate change. And if we don't do enough to address this, we'll also see sea levels rise significantly.

That's why the Christian charity, Operation Noah, has that name. Operation Noah works with the church to inspire action on the climate crisis. They say they are 'Faith-motivated, Science-informed, and Hope-inspired'. More from them another week.

But a bit about the story of Noah. It comes near the start of the Bible, as part of ten chapters I see as myth. It uses other ancient stories of a great flood, but adapts them to say something about the God of Israel. But something about myths is that they are lived out time and again in the history of the world. They can be applied to all sorts of circumstances. The great catastrophe of the flood can be applied to any catastrophe – a war, genocide, a natural disaster. All those situations that put people's lives in danger and cause them to flee their homes and livelihoods.

Perhaps you first heard about Noah as a child. Perhaps you had an ark and it helped you to identify animals. But this isn't a children's story. This is a story about the hardest, scariest and most traumatic things that people go through. And for many people in the world today, those things are already being caused by climate change.

Let's look at the story, starting with its context. God has created a good world, but humans have sinned, and that affects the whole creation (Genesis 1-3). But now, just a few chapters later, the Lord sees 'how

great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.' (v.5) There's a problem, and you couldn't state it more thoroughly than that! Humans are wicked and evil – sin has really increased.

But what is sin? Thinking back to the creation accounts, you might say that it's failing to live in the world as God intended us to; failing to care for it; failing to be good stewards of it. And that includes failing to care for and love other people. We fail to live in tune with God and all his creation. Because of sin, the world isn't the place God intended it to be.

So how does God respond? First of all, he says he'll destroy everything: '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...' (v.7) It sounds harsh, doesn't it? But note how this is said. God regrets that he made things and his heart is deeply troubled. He is desperately sad, and perhaps searching for a solution to sin.

Perhaps we don't like the means of doing this. Perhaps God doesn't like it either. But it's worth dwelling on this for a moment. This is the complete destruction of everything on earth. And that's pretty much what we're in for if global warming continues unabated. Earth will become uninhabitable.

But perhaps the main point of the flood in the Bible is to say that God can't bear sin, and he has to do something about it. Does God punish people for their sin? Does God do that in a specific way today? Those are hard questions, but one thing we do know is that we reap what we sow. We are responsible for the things that go wrong on the earth. We are responsible for climate change, which is causing extreme weather, drought and flooding in many parts of the world. So it's our responsibility to do something about it, and not to do that is sinful.

But then God changes his mind a bit – which the Hebrew God does. Instead of just destroying everything, instead of judgement, he finds a way to save things. He finds a way of both judging and saving at the same time. And that starts with one man. It will include his family too, but at first it's one man – Noah. Noah is presented as being different to other people around – righteous, blameless, walking faithfully with God. But it also says that Noah found favour with God. I wonder how much

of this is to do with Noah's holiness and how much is God's grace. Both seem to be there. But one way or another, God now chooses to save through Noah.

How does God do that? He gives instructions to Noah, and Noah does everything 'just as God commanded him.' (v.22) Noah has to trust God and obey the instructions – otherwise it won't work.

But how does this relate to us and the climate crisis? What could God be saying about that? Well, he's given us instructions too – but they come to us through people like scientists, who tell us what we need to change, and how quickly we need to change it. We have reports like the one that's come out this year from the International Panel on Climate Change. That states that climate change is widespread, rapid and intensifying. We have to listen to this, and we have to do something – we have to obey.

Of course, we might say, is this worth bothering with? Aren't we doomed? Look at everybody else – what are they doing? I wonder what the reaction was when Noah built the ark. The storybooks and films often show people ridiculing him. Genesis doesn't tell us, so we can only imagine. But Jesus says, 'As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.' (Matthew 24.37-39)

Jesus doesn't speak about ridicule, but apathy. And that's the biggest threat in the climate crisis – people who just don't seem to care, or put their own interests before those of the world. Of course, we're all hypocrites when it comes to this. But people continue eating and drinking without considering where their food comes from, marrying – and having non-biodegradable confetti, driving their petrol and diesel cars, investing in fossil fuels, buying utilities generated from fossil fuels... because they put their own lifestyle and finances before the needs of others in the world.

I wonder how we can address this apathy today. We have to start with ourselves, and perhaps the more people see what others are doing, the more things will change. I know some people really do this. They take

a stance not to have a car, or never to fly again. It can be really sacrificial – and it should be. We also have to pressurise government, because there are so many things we can't influence or control, but government can.

It's also important to see that Noah isn't called just to save his family but the animals too. Part of our problem is that we see the world just – or mainly – from a human point of view. We need to remember that we share the world with other creatures, and without at least some of them – like the bees – we would die. The solution needs to be good not just for humans but for the whole creation.

Last Tuesday, Pope Francis, the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, and the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, issued an unprecedented joint appeal to members of their churches to 'listen to the cry of the earth' and back action to stem the effects of climate change. In *A Joint Message for the Protection of Creation*, they asked Christians to pray that world leaders at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow in November would make courageous choices. They said: 'We call on everyone, whatever their belief or world view, to endeavour to listen to the cry of the earth and of people who are poor, examining their behaviour and pledging meaningful sacrifices for the sake of the earth which God has given us.'

'We stand before a harsh justice: biodiversity loss, environmental degradation and climate change are the inevitable consequences of our actions, since we have greedily consumed more of the earth's resources than the planet can endure.'

They also said that recent extreme weather events, natural disasters, floods, fires, droughts and rising sea levels have shown that 'climate change is not only a future challenge, but an immediate and urgent matter of survival.'

The Pope, Justin Welby and Patriarch Bartholomew together lead 1.6 billion Christians throughout the world. Just imagine the effect if they all did what their church leaders are asking. Of course, many Christians live in the Developing World and can do less to change things than we can. But if we act, it makes a difference. Our leaders, as well as God, are calling us to do something.

Now I realise this isn't a uniquely Christian concern and that you don't have to be a Christian to care for creation. But we are called to love all the world, just as God does. And if we care for creation in a sacrificial way, then it's something we do not just for others but for God. It becomes part of our worship, and also part of our witness and our mission. And if Christians don't do it... then what does it say about our faith?

Richard Wise