



VINCENZO FOPPA
Dome, c.1462–68,
Fresco, Portinari Chapel,
Basilica of Sant'Eustorgio,
Milan

Week 5: Comfort from God's Covenant - Love

(Genesis 8.20-9.17)

By The Venerable Martin Lloyd Williams, Archdeacon of Brighton & Lewes

Bible Reading

(Genesis 8.20-9.17)

Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird and offered burnt-offerings on the altar. And when the Lord smelt the pleasing odour, the Lord said in his heart, 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.

As long as the earth endures,
seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,
summer and winter, day and night,
shall not cease.'

God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered.

Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life.

Whoever sheds the blood of a human,
by a human shall that person's blood be shed;
for in his own image
God made humankind.

And you, be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth and multiply in it.'

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.

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I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.'

When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.' God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'

Reflection

How do I cope with disappointments? How do I process my experiences of loss, bewilderment and confusion? How do I navigate a world that suddenly seems to be uncertain and a total mystery to me?

Isaiah wrote his words of comfort to people, like us, who asked these questions. They were in exile. This same people told themselves stories as they looked for a narrative which would help them make sense of their distress.

One of those stories was about Noah and the chaos and destruction that befell creation. Everything was washed away. All was destroyed. Just one single family remained along with the animals they had gathered.

As they told this story, the exiled people of Israel tried to work out what God was like. They described the conversation that was going on within God's inner being. God is not distant and dispassionate their story went. Rather God is deeply grieved and troubled in heart. For one hundred and fifty days after the flood God pondered what to do next. All the while Noah and his floating zoo sailed across a sea of uncertainty with no horizon in sight.

Then God remembered Noah. God remembered. The waters receded. Noah, his family and all the animals emerged onto dry land. Noah built an altar and gave thanks. Those telling the story of Noah shared the conviction that God's memory of us is the last ground for hope in the face of death. Job wrote something similar, "if only you would hide me in the grave and conceal me until your anger has passed! If only you would set a time and then remember me." "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," said the thief crucified next to Jesus. God remembered Noah, he remembered Job and the thief too. Remembering Noah caused a shift in the heart of God. A shift from hostility to commitment.

"Remember me Lord" is a prayer I have often repeated gently to myself as I have sought to enter stillness in times of silence. I have often suggested it to others too. I can recall being with a youth group once, telling them to repeat the phrase, remember me Lord, slowly, gently and silently for just five minutes. I was convinced they would think it was weird. When the five minutes was over, we simply continued to sit in silence for five more minutes. For many it was a transformative moment.

Again, the story tellers described the thoughts whirling inside God's inner being. "Never again," said God in the depths of his heart, "never again will I curse the ground because of human beings." And at that moment God committed himself to unlimited patience. God knew that humankind had not fundamentally changed. But this episode had somehow brought about a change in God. As the exiled Israelites told this story, they didn't tell a story about a strong God and a needy world, they told a story about a grieving God and a resistant world. And as God established a new covenant with the earth, he says never again on five occasions. Never again will all life be destroyed, he says repeatedly.

And so, the cause-and-effect connection of guilt to punishment is broken. God has changed his mind. God does what human being find it so hard to do. He becomes unconcerned about the moral high ground. He established a new covenant knowing that we need to be converted. The story of Noah was told for various reasons. One of those reasons was to understand better what God was like. Our understanding of what God is like often requires conversion.

Sr Joan Chittister OSB has pointed that, "Some believe in a God of wrath and become wrathful with others as a result. Some believe in a God who is indifferent to the world and when they find themselves all alone, shrivel up and die inside from the indifference they feel in the world around them. Some believe in a God who makes traffic lights turn green and so become the children of magical coincidence. Some believe in a God of laws and crumble in spirit when they themselves break them or become stern, demanding from others standards they cannot keep themselves. They conceive of God as the manipulator of the universe rather than its blessing-maker."

Here is a story of conversion in the heart of God. Everything is changed. He is now committed to remembering, and never again causing destruction. And so the foundation for our own conversion is laid. The new covenant is made not just with humankind. All living things and the very earth itself are God's covenant partners now. The newly revealed earth is consequently sacred. The earth is itself in dynamic relationship with God. Creation speaks of God. All the world is so much more than a stage. Humankind now has the possibility of being caught up in a whirlwind of creativity and grace and new life. This is life under the rainbow.

Hymn

I have this hope

Ben Fielding/Dean Ussher

I have this hope
As an anchor for my soul
Through every storm
I will hold to You

With endless love
All my fear is swept away
In everything
I will trust in You

There is hope in the promise of the cross
You gave everything to save the world You love
And this hope is an anchor for my soul
Our God will stand unshakable

Unchanging One
You who was and is to come
Your promise sure
You will not let go

There is hope in the promise of the cross
You gave everything to save the world You love
And this hope is an anchor for my soul
Our God will stand unshakable

There is hope in the promise of the cross
You gave everything to save the world You love
And this hope is an anchor for my soul

Our God will stand unshakable
Your Name is higher
Your Name is greater
All my hope is in You

Your word unfailing
Your promise unshaken
All my hope is in You

Prayer

Please simply slowly repeat the prayer "Remember me Lord" silently for up to 5 minutes