

Second After Trinity 2016 Evensong

Genesis 8: 15 – 9: 17

I'm not convinced that God has finished with us, yet. It would be interesting to look with a very wide-angled focus and to be able to see the contours of God's involvement with people in England over the next hundred or two hundred years. I'm sure God's got something up his sleeve. But, so far as church attendance as we understand it is concerned, things don't look too good. Attendance has been consistently declining for more than a century. It is important to remember that this is not a new phenomenon: the high point in English church attendance was, I think 1904, and it's been downhill since then; but because it's been declining on a curve, the rate of decline is accelerating faster and faster.

But, even though that is true, the story of Noah's ark endures. It may be not quite as well-known as Mary and Joseph going to Bethlehem with their donkey, but

it must be almost as well known. I can't think of any Bible stories that capture popular imagination better than those two. There must hardly be a nursery in the country that hasn't got a picture, perhaps a mural, of the ark and the animals going into it, two by two, and then of course the rainbow we've heard about tonight arching over it.

But what's surprising is that, although the story and the visual imagery that goes with it, is popular, the theological message goes straight over the top of our heads. What this story tells us about the nature of God is far more sophisticated than anything that goes anywhere near the popular conception of God's nature.

Contemporary atheists tell us that we must be stupid, crude and primitive to believe in God. It's about time we grew out of believing in an old man in the sky whom we have to keep happy by never stepping out of line. Well I've said it before, and I'll say it again: I don't believe in the God atheists don't believe in either.

Because the God we meet jumping out of the pages of Scripture is not the God the atheists dismiss. He's not an old man with a big stick, just waiting to punish us unless we can persuade him that we really don't deserve it. And it's this story of Noah that marks the transition from that primitive sort of belief to a more sophisticated view of God, if only we could be sophisticated enough to believe it.

At the outset of the story God is indeed the grumpy old man who's going to annihilate his creation because they're wicked. It's all gone wrong; so he's going to blot them all out and start again. But the most remarkable thing happens in the middle of the story: God remembers; he remembers Noah; he's reminded how much he loves him; and he changes his mind.

And the way he changes his mind is what's set out in the ending of the story; which is what we've read this evening. We get a sophisticated view of God. There are three features to it:

1. God accepts that human beings are wicked.
2. Even though God accepts that human beings are wicked, he will not punish us for it; but, rather, affirms the sanctity of our life.
3. He promises that this is how he is going to relate to us; and the story uses this wonderful imagery of the rainbow as a symbol of his unending commitment to us, as much to remind God as to remind us: a bit like a wedding ring, with no beginning and no end – you can never find the end of rainbow; and similarly there is no end to God's commitment to affirm us.

This image of God has been with us for thousands of years. But it's not caught on! Otherwise atheists wouldn't so easily be able to dismiss our faith. But more importantly, much more importantly than a sterile academic argument about the intellectual viability of belief in God, is the pastoral and spiritual reality that people tell me, week in and week out, that they're not good enough to be a Christian. Or they're

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not good enough to be involved in Christian ministry. Or there's something that happened to them decades ago that prevents them from holding office in the church. Even though God says, "I know all that. Get over it. I have. There's nothing you can do that can make me love you or trust you to do my will one jot less."

And God goes on to say, in this ending of the Noah story that we've had this evening, just as he affirms us, so must we affirm God's image in everybody else, no matter who they are. And yet we are complicit with imperialistic U.S. foreign policy which relies on asserting military domination over difference, domination which inevitably leads to the degradation of both dominator and dominated – witness the photos from Abu Ghraib jail at the end of the Iraqi War; we live in the midst of political rhetoric which demonises the other, from the florid outrages of Donald Trump to the undertones of the Brexiteers - not that the Remain campaign is covering itself in any

greater glory, but the point is that trading on anxiety about difference is a particular feature of the Brexit campaign. And of course we all struggle with sexualities that reduce others to mere objects of desire.

So look at the rainbow. It's kids' stuff. It's painted on the wall of every nursery. And yet we're so resistant to it. Keep looking at the rainbow. God has promised. We can rejoice in the liberty of the children of God. God trusts us; and we can trust him to do more things with us yet.

Amen.