Sermon for First Sunday of Lent Year B

Readings: Genesis 9:8-17; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

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Noah’s Ark makes a wonderful children’s story, but we do it an injustice if that is all we think it is. Noah does not feature much in the NT as a past symbol of Jesus’ present ministry; in that role, Moses predominates, or sometimes Adam is used, but here in 1Peter 3, we see one of the very few NT references to the Noah story. In order to make sense of this NT reference we need to understand what the story meant to the Jewish mind of the day.

Genesis contains a mixture of tribal history and myth, by that term, I mean symbolic religious stories which help explain the existing background to the historical stories that are about to be told. As you can imagine, it’s an impossible task getting all Christians to agree where the symbolic stories stop and the history starts, for wherever we choose to draw that line, there continues to be examples of each throughout the entire Bible, as symbolic stories are used again and again to illustrate the strange happenings in history the authors are trying to explain.

Where people have chosen to draw the line between story and history has changed with the times. Personally, I like to draw that line with Abraham being the beginning of the history, but I also believe the Noah story is based on an historical flood experience which took place round about 3,100BC.

The important thing for us today is what the Noah story meant to the writers of the NT.

To understand the Noah story, you need to know **why** God sent the Flood. This is found in Genesis 6: There we see the story starts with the belief that the wickedness of men and women was not simply due to their own culpability. As in the Garden of Eden story, human culpability is just part of the story. Behind human wickedness, they believed evil spiritual powers were at work. In the Garden it is the serpent that symbolises this malign influence affecting human actions; in the story of Noah it is fallen angels who covet the beautiful women of the human world and infect them and their offspring, creating giants who became the heroes of the ancient legends the Jews knew long predated their own national stories.

Common to both these stories and the NT too, is the belief that behind human actions lie also the malign forces of evil powers. Humans may have all sinned and have to bear the consequences – but they have not done this alone – they are being attacked by forces beyond themselves which also need defeating if men and women are ever to be truly set free. This is the principle behind all the stories involving Satan. Christ must also overcome the devil and all his evil powers, if he is ever to save the human race.

Yet humans remain always in the image of the God who created them; God still loves them and is prepared to do whatever it takes to save them from the influences of these evil spiritual powers and the consequences of their sin.

In the Garden of Eden, God declared that all that he had created was good; and in the Noah story God declares that whatever the sins committed by humans, from taking the fruit from the forbidden tree, to Cain murdering his brother Abel, God would work with whoever was righteous to put things right for everyone.

So Noah steps forward as an example for other historical men and women to follow: He is an archetype of a single righteous person who can be used by God to save the many, in Noah’s story, to give a fresh start to the entire human family through his three sons.

As the Noah story rests in the OT, those killed in the Flood for their wickedness are left dead and gone. **Despite** the idea that they are in part victims in their own demise through the influence of evil forces beyond them, their condemnation appears full and irrevocable.

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Now we move on to consider the NT story. Jesus begins his ministry with that strange tale of him being confronted by Satan who tries to do a deal with him. Jesus resists the temptation and locks himself in implacable enmity with the devil and all he stands for. Jesus has come to destroy the powers of evil or be destroyed by them. That is the crucial matter at the heart of the NT story.

Whether your GP would diagnose any illness today as stemming from the influence of demons is not the main point. Just as we draw the boundaries between symbolic story and history in different places today than they did in other times, so too we draw the line between where the power or influence of evil starts and finishes in a different place too. We no longer include epilepsy or mental illness as within the scope of the demonic.

What we do have in common with the people of those days is the need to still talk about evil. Even in today’s world, we have to resort to expressions such as evil, the demonic, or being infected with madness, to try to express a depth of depravity which exceeds our normal human experience of wrong-doing.

The mass murder of the holocaust, or Pol Pot’s regime, the delight certain people take in torture, killing and inflicting pain still sometimes make us reach for that lexicon of religious language to express a vague feeling that somehow, culpable as those individuals clearly are, it as if they are goaded to it, possessed of a madness that transcends human rationality.

As people living in comfortable, safe, Western societies, we now struggle to use such vocabulary. We need to be thankful that we have been spared such experiences of depraved human actions that would provoke us to speak in such terms.

Last week, February 2015, there was a newspaper article in the *Telegraph* that spoke about this modern difficulty with the devil. Last week the General Synod of the Church of England voted to remove the reference to the devil from their baptism service.

It used to read: “Do you renounce the works of the devil?” This phrase has been part of that service for most of the Christian era, but now the Anglicans, despite their love of tradition, have succumbed to the modernism that Methodists embraced or succumbed to – depending on where you personally draw the line – and removed the reference because it was “unhelpful.”

*The Telegraph* article went on to ask if we do not still need the language of the devil and Satan in order for us to get to grips with a very slippery, but very real phenomenon in human experience. The article said we do not need to return to the medieval obsession with the devil in its liturgies, hymns and art, which reflected their belief that without faith in the devil there is no faith in God; but humans have always needed to resort to such language at times of extreme brutality, cruelty and vice. To take all that language away makes us less able to talk about it, conceptualise it and oppose it. Symbolic language or actual spiritual being, you decide where you draw the line. Seeing the devil everywhere is something we can do without; but failing to see him anywhere might lead us to acquiesce in matters that are truly beyond rational thought.

What do I mean by the evil which is in the world? In what sort of situations might I find the language of Satanic and demonic useful even in 2015? Well, I mean the evil that is found in unjust, corrupt systems that deny justice, or freedom or a fair share; I mean twisted ideologies used to maintain power; or gratuitous violence to get one’s own way, or the reduction of human beings to commodities that can be sold or trafficked; I mean the madness that can infect a whole nation with a thirst for death and killing, be it in concentration camps or in pseudo-religious butchery.

We need to recognise evil when we see it and have a name for it that evokes a deep dread and a willingness to sacrifice all to stand against it. To water it down for safe middle class western tastes may lead us to ignore the challenge of evil because we prefer the comfort of our safe and secure lives.

Christians can trust that in Christ evil can be overcome and we should not be tempted to compromise with evil as if it cannot be defeated. Christians are still called to recognise where evil is at work even though we draw that line in a different place today than in ancient times and we must have the confidence that it can be defeated – not in our own strength – but in the strength and in the Name of Christ.

But understanding **the manner** of the Christian’s struggle with evil is as important as believing in the victory.

Jesus facing down the devil in the wilderness tells us Jesus will not oppose evil with even greater evil, he will not resort to bribery, nor stoop to mere show and pomp, but by being willing to suffer and even die to bring evil to its knees. This is now possible because in Christ Christians know that death itself has lost its power – and the threat of death is evil’s highest card.

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So we return to Noah, that famous example of a righteous man whose faith and intercession saved the whole human story from coming to a premature end at the Flood. Unfortunately, Noah’s victory was just one battle, but that story has inspired so many good and righteous people to stand against evil through the generations.

Now in Christ, the decisive victory over evil is about to be won. No longer does the world have to compromise with evil systems, demonic ideologies, or wicked people – for the worst evil can dish out is death – and that weapon has been rendered useless by the suffering, rising Christ.

That strange passage in 1 Peter 3 about Jesus descending to hades to preach the Gospel to those sinners swept away by the Flood is a way of declaring the universality of Christ’s victory over evil. It is a victory that extends across all time, and reaches all places and is secured for all people.

In an age when we are being forced to believe again in the existence of evil as it intrudes once more into our comfortable western lives, there will be many calls in the years ahead to confront evil in its various forms. We Christians should be experts on the subject. We don’t have to leave it to politicians alone.

We Christians ought to know the nature of evil in all its many guises. We Christians should know that victory is ultimately secure and so never admit defeat. We Christians ought to have the courage not to fight evil with evil, but to take the way of the cross, the way of innocent, suffering, trusting love.

Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard

February 2015

Order of Service for 22 February 2015

10.00am Trinity Church, Howick-Pakuranga

Sentence Christ suffered for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God.

Hymn HAP 688 Who would true valour see

Prayers and Lord’s Prayer

Today’s Story Noah’s shopping list?

Hymn HAP 329 All creatures of our God and King

First Reading Genesis 9:8-17

Second Reading 1 Peter 3:18-22

Third Reading Mark 9:9-15

Sermon

Hymn HAP 264 Jesus the name high over all

Prayers of Intercession

Minister: Loving God, when hope is lost and faith destroyed:

**People: Call us to repentance, renewal and trust.**

Offering and announcements

Hymn HAP 747 Saviour from sin, I wait to prove

Blessing