

‘Noah – an unholy mess drowning in unbiblical detail’ – this was the headline statement from the Guardian about the new film hailed five years ago by some as the return of the blockbuster. If anyone still watches films on terrestrial TV, I understand that Noah was shown on BBC recently. Many biblical figures have been the subjects of great films, and of course, by the time we get to Moses and beyond, the writers of script and screenplay have a certain amount of period background detail which they can use to flesh out the biblical story. To make a blockbuster of Noah is altogether a more daring exploit – after all, the story takes place in a setting before recorded history, filled with complex and confusing historical and mythological pictures and images.

I have chosen this Holy Week to take some figures from Scripture – some will be more familiar than others – and

to use their stories to illustrate six important biblical themes which throw light on the redemptive power of the passion of Christ. So while the story of Noah is fascinating for the detail and colour that remains on the biblical pages (and intriguing for the things that are left out), what I am really looking for is what light the story can shed upon the events of this week of weeks, what makes Noah a witness to those crucial days which for him were a long time in the future.

The Noah story is in fact one of several in the ancient Near East that speak of the salvation of a small remnant of people from a flood. This of course leads scholars to wonder whether they arise from an ancient natural disaster of which these stories are the only evidence remaining to us. They have in common a beginning where a divine force decides to destroy humanity – or the whole earth – but unlike some of the other stories,

in the case of Noah we find he is not battling with his deity to stay alive. The God of Noah has *chosen* this righteous man as the instrument of salvation.

On Maundy Thursday at the end of the solemn watch we will be reading the words of Jesus from John's gospel: 'You did not choose me; no, I have chosen you'. Being chosen is a common theme through all of God's dealings with people – indeed, Israel becomes designated as the Chosen People, and Jesus as the chosen one of Israel. Saint Paul takes up the same theme – that we are chosen by God to serve God's purposes, and as with Noah, those purposes are for salvation.

If we can get past the narrative detail about the construction of the ark and the nature of the creatures that populate it, as well as the symbolic mystical period

of 150 days, followed by the (again symbolic) 40 days which carry with them the idea of a complete change and transformation, we can look at the evidence that God means to bring good out of this disaster, for God brings forth something quite new in the form of the rainbow, and the promise that from henceforth day will follow night without fail throughout all generations.

This is the first sign, following the Garden of Eden and the Fall, that God wishes to build up a relationship for good with the world. It is in fact the first of several Covenants which God makes.

A Covenant, as you will certainly know, is a solemn agreement, often accompanied by the swearing of oaths, and intended to be permanent. The Covenant is made with Noah but intended to be for the whole of creation. It is followed in scripture by Covenants with

Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Solomon – among others – and the complicated imagery of the Letter to the Hebrews teaches that all of these Covenants were brought to fulfilment in Christ.

The reality of the Covenant is that in the Old Testament (a word which itself indicates a Covenant) it is an unequal relationship – and how! The Covenant with Noah has its terms dictated by God, who will never again destroy the earth because of humankind; and who also lays some basic rules on Noah and his descendants to reflect the beginning of a special relationship.

The Covenant with Abraham has similar promises. Because Abraham has been prepared to leave his stable life and take up the life of a nomad in response to God's call – and because he has been prepared to give up everything, including his first-born son, for God's sake –

Abraham is promised the most important thing that anyone in his ancient society could have: large numbers of descendants. The Abraham story sees a great deal of testing of Abraham's faith, but just as Noah is a righteous man, so Abraham proves to be a man of faith.

The Covenant with Moses begins with God's promises from the burning bush, and through the Exodus, during which Moses, though unsure of himself, leads the whole people to follow God's lead across the Red Sea and into the wilderness, God shows faithfulness until the revealing of the Law on Mount Sinai which will be the regulation of the covenant with God's Chosen People. Though the people are now actively involved in keeping (or mostly not keeping) the Covenant, and it is the people's representatives who carry out the required sacrifices to fulfil their side of the bargain, it is still an unequal covenant, as indeed is the Covenant with

David, and the subsequent building of the Temple under Solomon.

It is unequal because God dictates the terms of the relationship, and it is unequal because the people (including David!) do not keep to the terms of the covenant, behaving outside the Law, and even entering relationships with other gods. It takes the prophets to show the people how unfaithful they are being; and it is with the prophets that the idea of a new Covenant begins to appear. The serial attacks on Israel by surrounding peoples, and the great Exile, are seen as being a result of the breaking of the covenant relationship with God by the people. Their worship of other gods is seen as adultery; and they have lost the protection that comes from the observance of the Law.

The prophets, however, see God as faithful, and this leads to the teaching that there will one day be a new Covenant that depends not on Law but on love for its fulfilment. This is the Covenant that we see fulfilled in Jesus: it is reflected in the way all four gospels present Jesus, and it is no longer an unequal Covenant, because Jesus, as Paul teaches, becomes equal with us so that God may deal with us on a level playing field. Jesus in his humanity wins this relationship by the final sacrifice to end all sacrifices of blood – his death on the cross. Paul shows how the cross reconciles all things on earth and in heaven with each other and with God. With the death of Jesus things have changed, and we are required to love as God loves us, in order to keep the New Covenant.

Some of the other themes we will be exploring this week will complete the illustration of what the New

Covenant means, but I want to give a final focus to something the New Covenant has in common with the old ones. All the way up to the Temple worship of Israel, the ratification of the covenant agreement involved the blood of sacrifice. Abraham came to realise that it would no longer be the barbarity of human sacrifice, as it was for most of nations surrounding Israel, yet the first-born still had to be redeemed; and the various sacrifices that took place in the Holy of Holies were a sign that the Covenant required giving up things that were important, even essential, even life itself.

While the New Covenant requires no bloody sacrifices, a Covenant based on love requires the greatest sacrifice of all: the sacrifice of the lover for the beloved. Love does not fully exist until each is prepared to give all for the other.

The fact is that in creating the New Covenant God in Jesus has given us everything; and when we fully enter into the Covenant relationship it involves us giving everything in return. A profound and also chastening thought as we move through this Holy Week!

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