

**1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent, Year B**

**Genesis 9.8-17 • Psalm 25.1-9 • 1 Peter 3.18-end • Mark 1.9-15**

**18 February 2024**

**St Luke's, Chelsea**

**Sam Hole**

My post-Christmas 'get away from it all' reading has this year taken me to some rather windswept shores. The book is called *The Wager*, and the promise of the subtitle is entirely true: it is indeed *A Tale of Shipwreck, Mutiny, and Murder*. This is the gripping story of a mid-eighteenth-century British ship that went down near a remote island in southern Chile, and of the struggles of its crew to return home. But perhaps most memorable of all are the crew's recorded descriptions of passing around the violent seas of Cape Horn in their flimsy vessel. Unexpected waves crashed across the deck, consigning sailors to their hammocks with broken femurs, concussion, and worse. The author David Grann recounts how the winds were so strong that the sails could not be unfurled, and at one point several sailors were sent to line up together to form a makeshift sail with their bodies.<sup>1</sup> Why such ferocious seas? In good part because the seas around Antarctica have no land to stop the progress of the winds and the waves.<sup>2</sup> The waves just build up and build up, in what the chaplain of the first British ship ever to navigate these waters described as 'these most mad seas'.<sup>3</sup>

And I thought of those poor men, tossed about in their splintering ship, as I read today's story of Noah. Set aside those children's Bible images of a rather top-heavy boat merrily bobbing about on calm seas. Imagine a globe now entirely composed of water, and the winds and waves rushing endlessly against the tiny vessel under

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<sup>1</sup> David Grann, *The Wager*, pp.83-4

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.62

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.63, quoting a sixteenth-century British chaplain on the first British voyage to Cape Horn.

leaden skies. Can you imagine Noah's relief when the dove did not return, a sign of dry land somewhere out there? Or the sight of Noah and his family disembarking from their ramshackle, tattered vessel onto dry lands after those months of being washed to and fro?

Indeed, when next month we hold a special performance of Britten's opera *Noye's Fludde* [pronounced's *Noye's Flood*] the liturgical purists among you may have to cover your ears. As the dry land is reached, the animals exclaim a certain 'A-word' that we don't normally say in church during Lent. But, mindful of the terrors of the long voyage we have to imagine they've endured, I'm sympathetic to their language.

The promise of God to Noah at that moment of safety seems all the more wonderful: '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.'

Because water can be a symbol for many of the terrors we face. Just think of the first two verses of the Bible: In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth ... a wind from God swept over the face of the waters' (Gen 1.1, 2b). Creation is an act of God's pulling order out of that in which there can be no order – the swirling waters to which the flood heralds the world's return. Or as the Psalmist exclaims in terror:

Save me, O God : for the waters are come in, even unto my soul.

I stick fast in the deep mire, where no ground is : I am come into deep waters, so that the floods run over me. (Psalm 69.1-2, 1662 BCP)

Water speaks of the chaos that seems to be lurking around our human existence, as individuals and as a species. We think the path along the beach looks an easy way forward, but suddenly the tide is

rushing in. We think we've reached a green field of civilisation to settle down in, but it turns out to be a flood plain. What is life-giving in small quantities can all too suddenly wash away the certainties of our existence.

So perhaps we need to do something different with our baptisms. After all, when Jesus is baptised as in today's gospel reading, this isn't a gentle dip in a crystal-clear chalk stream. This is a plunging of his whole self back into the swirling, turbulent waters from whence our cosmos came, only for him to rise again. And maybe our font could be redesigned a little – less a marble bowl filled with the best water that Thames Water has to offer, and rather a bowl filled with murky brown water bubbling up from the plughole. The image loses the way in which baptism is a moment of cleaning, to be sure – and it would lose us a few candidates for baptism too. But it captures with full force the way in which our Christian baptism is as Paul puts it, a 'baptism into death' (Rom 6.4). In baptism we die to our old ways of life so that we can live a new life with Christ.

It is common to look at Lent as a journey into the wilderness. And that's a helpful image. Our forty days and forty nights are in good part an imitation of Christ's period after his baptism, praying, facing temptation, and preparing for his adult ministry.

But in the story of Noah, 'forty days and forty nights' is also the length of time that God sends rain on the earth (Gen 7.4). And the resonance here with Jesus, and in turn with our period of Lent, is no accident.

Because we make our imaginative journey into the desert in order to set aside the things that we allow to distract us from our true calling to be people of God. But there is one thing that we cannot leave behind. Leave behind the TV, yes, and the coffee morning, and the

work on your desk – even take away your mobile phone. But we can't leave our mind behind.

And when in the third and fourth centuries hundreds of individuals set off into the Egyptian desert to live isolated existences, these so-called Desert Fathers weren't running away from the realities of life. They were taking themselves to a place where they could confront the most challenging reality of all. Because if your mind is anything like mine, it sometimes feels like that revised plan for a font I offered a moment ago – a bubbling mass of brown chaotic water, with murky depths I daren't poke too hard into, for fear of what I might stir up. For the Desert Fathers, finding a place where they could learn to recognise, and by turns to confront or accept their deepest thoughts and desires – this was the work they needed to do if they were to let the work of God flow in them.

So consider what you might make of the opportunity of this Lent. It's common to ask the question of 'what are you doing for Lent'? But that's secondary to the ultimate question: 'this Lent, who are you becoming, as a child of God?' Perhaps it will be through our Lent Talks, or our Bible study; through worship here or elsewhere, through time that sets aside some of your usual patterns of life.

But remember too that, though it may do you good to gaze into your depths, God sees you, in all your muck and marvel. In that epic story of Noah I don't read of God saving Noah's family alone among all humans in some vain divine hope that Noah will reset the earth back to the paradise of Eden. I hear God's recognition that the waters of chaos remain in this world; the shipwrecks of lives and communities are still all too real and devastating today. But I hear too the force of God's promise made in the rainbow: an 'everlasting covenant between God and every living creature', a promise that God will be with us. And I trust that Christ, who in his baptism entered into the waters, and in his passion knew the depths to which humanity can sink, will be with us too, to guide us to our journey's end.