

Childhood memories of Noah's Ark, as mentioned in our first reading (Genesis 9.8-17), and the 8 ungainly people who entered with the animals, make it hard for us to take the story seriously. Our forefathers had the same problem. In their Middle Ages mystery plays, Noah's wife provided the comic relief, by refusing to enter the Ark and having to be pushed up the plank amid shouts of laughter. Then a 19th century poem by W.E. Ayton says:

Fharson had a son,
Who married Noah's daughter,
And nearly spoiled the Flood,
By drinking up the water.

But we should try to understand the story more seriously, as the bible writers did. In 1872 George Smith, an employee of the British Museum, issued a paper after repairing 25,000 clay tablets of Assyrian inscriptions. This gave the Assyrian story of the Flood, with its remarkable resemblance to the Hebrew Bible version. And tablets found later prove that the flood story was told more than 4,000 years ago. Even the raven and the dove appear in the Assyrian version.

Secondly, some years ago, at Ur of the Chaldees in the south of Mesopotamia, a soil deposit some 7 to 8 feet deep was discovered: clearly the silt left by a huge flood. Similar finds of different periods have been made elsewhere in Iraq. So there must have been several large floods; at least one so extensive that it became the basis of a saga which Abraham brought with him, when he left Mesopotamia for the Promised Land.

But there must be some hidden meaning why the bible attaches so much importance to a flood that devastated another country. If we go back in thought to ancient Egypt and Babylonia, we learn that Pharaoh was believed to be divine, because he had given peace and succeeded in regulating the waters of the lower Nile so that people could get their share of the yearly overflow of water and grow their crops. In early Mesopotamia there was no strong central government. The great rivers of the Euphrates and the Tigris were always erratic and not controlled in the same way. From time to time dreadful floods occurred wiping out whole cities. Water was regarded as a hostile force. Useful when controlled, but liable to do untold damage. (The flood control barriers on the River Thames were installed to deal with a similar problem.)

So there arose the Babylonian myth in which Tiamat the goddess of the great deep rebelled against the gods who deputed one of their number, Marduk, to subdue Tiamat. The Babylonian story of the creation tells us that Tiamat was therefore spilt in two parts: one being the sea and the underground sources of springs and rivers; and the other being the clouds in the sky. This story is reflected in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, where the waters under the earth are divided from those above the firmament. This motif recurs in chapter 7.11 which tells us that when Noah had entered the Ark, "all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened". Thus the primeval forces of destruction, hitherto kept under control, are allowed to wreak vengeance on a guilty generation. Yet the most important point for us to remember is that they are

still under control. They come into operation at the word of God and, when they have done their work, they return to their original place.

Noah and his family stand for the faithful remnant. The Ark symbolises the church, where the faithful can remain in safety during the outbreak of evil. Often we hear stories of the Old Testament told to remind us of the evil of mankind, and to emphasise how bad we are. But these usually show a warped, one-sided, mentality. The more important Christian lesson to be learnt from such stories is not man's part, but God's. The Old Testament as well as the New shows God's love for man; his solicitous concern. God does not kick us when we are down. His curse in the Garden of Eden is followed by his clothing of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3.21). In his cursing of Cain, his judgement is mitigated by putting a protecting mark on Cain's forehead (4.15). Similarly in the flood story, a faithful remnant in Noah and his family are cared for by God, and it concludes with the statement that never again will man suffer such a severe judgement (8.11).

This is the biblical meaning of the rainbow, which is the outward and visible sign of the new covenant between God and man. Genesis 9.13 tells us: "I set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth". In stormy weather the rainbow assures us that the sun is always shining not far away from us; and neither is God. We are taught that the forces of evil, for which the flood stands, will not prevail. Evil is always in the world, but never strong enough to overcome the good in the world.

Remember also that this covenant was made with you and me; not only with the ancient Jews. For Noah's sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, were involved. Shem was the Father of the Semitic races including the Jews. Ham and Japheth were Fathers of all other nations of their world, the Gentiles. This covenant was sealed by the commandment from God forbidding murder (9.6). "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image". This foundation of natural religion justifies our trying to find something of the original revelation in heathen religions.

But what is even more remarkable, is that the covenant is with nature as well as with man. God gives us the living creatures and green plants as our food (9.3), but warns us against wanton and unnecessary killing. He says that the rainbow "is the sign of the covenant which I make between me and every living creature that is with you, for all generations" (9.12). The harmony of Adam and the animals in Paradise is restored. Man is elder brother to the living creatures and a trustee for their welfare, responsible to God for his stewardship. That is the lesson which we need to learn and remember from the Flood story.

Legend tells us that if one digs at the end of a rainbow, you will find a pot of gold. So when you next see a rainbow, by all means think of the buried treasure to which it points. And if you find it you can share it with me! But also remember that the real treasure is not hidden; it is there for you

to take. It is the treasure of the covenant made between God and all of us. Keep that lesson before you during this period of Lent as you use it to come spiritually closer to Almighty God.