

So Many Animals!

Sermon 18th July 2021

Genesis 9 1-17

Today's rather intriguing title for the sermon is 'So Many Animals' and in first preparing it I was not sure if it was a positive or a negative.

On the positive side, I guess we all love the story of Noah's Ark. I know from Families Together that the children do, all those cute animals going up into the ark two by two. ***So many animals***. It remains probably one of the better known Bible stories outside of church circles.

On the negative side I personally rather sympathise with Noah's sons Shem, Ham and Japeth who having fed and mucked out every single species of living creatures on the ark twice a day for 190 days might just say 'So many animals'

In this morning's sermon we are looking again at some of the fundamental deeper meanings behind the early chapters of Genesis. This morning we race ahead from the first four chapters on creation, the story of Adam and Eve, the disordering of the fall and unsettling story of Cain & Able as humankind began to wrestle internally with the impact of resisting evil. Now we have raced on to chapter 9 and the aftermath and meaning of Noah's Ark.

Aside from the cute animals bit, if you stop to think about it, the story of Noah is actually a bit of a hard one involving genocide on a global scale - What might a non-Christian's take on the story be:

Could it be:

God was so fed up with evil people doing evil things in the world he created that he decided to completely destroy the whole of humanity plus every living creature to boot. However he knew of one good family led by Noah so he would give them a lifeboat plus the opportunity to save a specimen pair of each animal species. So after he drowned the whole world except Noah, his family and the ark animals, he promised never to do it again and invented the rainbow as a reminder of his promise – as much to himself as to Noah's descendants.

As apparent fits of temper go, God's reaction looks pretty horrible - and I fear as simply and literally told, the story rather creates the image of a God that punishes evil people and rewards/saves the good.

This doesn't quite square with the God we know who is forgiving and working through Christ to unleash the good in everyone. Let's face it - our experience is that it's hard to find anyone who is totally evil or totally good. WE don't live in that sort of binary world.

So I suggest that we rather need to look at his passage for its deeper meanings rather than as an accurate description of an event in climate history. We have to be careful not to fall into the trap of telling a cute little story with so many animals, that in simplistic telling can misrepresent the nature of God.

In Noah we have much to learn about God's power, our ability to please him, the sanctity of both human and animal life and the importance of being held responsible both individually and collectively.

Back in the first chapter of Genesis we learnt that God's intention in creation was for humankind to have a special place - having been made in the image of God and, whilst having dominion over animals, this was not for the purpose of food. Only the plants were given for food.

We know that things then go a bit pear-shaped (or apple-shaped) with humanity - as we choose free will and freedom to practise both good and evil. Last week in Cain we considered the latter in relation to ourselves.

So by the time we get to the end of chapter 3, in God's sight, his creation of the world was now not the place he intended to be, courtesy of humankind.

Now I don't want to draw too many comparisons between my dad and God, but if my dad had newly decorated the hall and stairs, he went ballistic when I put my childish sticky dirty fingers on the fresh paintwork going up the stairs.

Perhaps this is what the story of Noah is telling us. That having created a world intended to be perfect and wonderful, God was seriously unhappy with humankind and could let it be known.

An all-powerful creator in the floods has the power over creation to eliminate evil and the causes of evil – humankind.

But the first point of the story is not so much that he did it but that he could – and still could do it. **God can be disappointed and angry and not just supine as many wish him to be**

The second point of the story is that he chose not to eliminate humanity in total and subsequently made it clear he never would in the future.

In chapter 6 v 5-7.

The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the Lord said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth – men and animals and creatures that move along the ground and birds of the of the air – for I am grieved that I have made them."

But – and when a sentence starts with a 'but' you know something important is about to be said

Verse 9 – ***But Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord.***

So before we even get to Chapter 9, the subject of this sermon, we already know:

- that God seriously dislikes evil because it pollutes his perfect creation,
- that mankind is not separate to creation and ruling over it like God, but in God's view is inseparable from the natural world and cannot exist in isolation. Agh – so many animals at risk of our evil.
- that God notices and reacts to the good in people

And that's where I'm going to skip over most of the story of Noah's ark and the flood which you know so well.

I'm picking up the Noah story right at the end of chapter 8

All the animals – so many animals ...came out of the ark, one kind after another.

Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and, taking some of the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.

Think about it – what this story is telling us that we can influence the heart of the almighty and all-powerful God, by a simple act of worship and thankfulness. This is explosive in understanding our relationship with God and the nature of God. We can influence Go; if we can't, then why would we bother to pray and praise? The power rests with him but we are in a relationship with him. He is not a dictator deity.

Before God we are not inconsequential and the story of Noah tells us to ignore that great nagging, self-deprecating, call for personal inaction in the face of evil. There's nothing I can do about it. Noah tells us even something small finds favour with God.

Well, just as we are finding out that life post-Covid will not be quite the same as life before Covid – it was the same for Noah in the story. The relationship between God and humankind is changed.

It's these changes that form the third main point of the Noah story – the strings attached to the promise never to destroy humanity and all creatures. It's contained in that difficult text in our reading:

V 3 Everything that lives and moves will be food for you, Just as I gave you the green plants so I give you everything.

But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. And for your lifeblood I will demand an accounting from very animal, and from each man too I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man.

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed. For in the image of God has God made man

Now this is a perplexing passage often used to justify the death penalty in the more socially-conservative branches of our faith and of course is the initial background to the Jewish laws defining Kosher food.

Personally, I think it's more fundamental than such a literal interpretation.

The word 'blood' has a special meaning; in this context it means Life or the very essence of a person's soul – we see that meaning in our act of communion later when we refer to the blood of Christ and in the past would have drunk it – taking the very essence of Christ into ourselves.

We are given the right to eat animals – part of his creation – but we are to honour the sanctity of those animals in the eyes of God and are to be held to account if we don't.

Equally we and the animals are to recognise the sanctity of human life because we are not only made by God, but in the image of God. If we don't, we will equally be held to account.

The third point is that if we cross these sanctity lines, then we are to engage in a process of justice against our fellow man. No longer is justice and punishment exercised only by God, but we are to dispense justice for breaches of his rules or laws on his behalf. Everything that follows in scripture moves us away beyond a narrow interpretation of a life for a life, but towards the wider knowledge of God's definition of human sanctity in the ten commandments and of course in Christ's more positive imperative to love our neighbour.

We are not only to seek justice but also exercise it over each other.

After Noah the exercise of free will by humankind, that understanding and practice of good and evil - is balanced by our participating in administering justice to tackle the consequences of our actions. God ask us to hold ourselves to account on how we follow his laws - free will and accountability intertwined.

So next time you see a rainbow or just so many animals in the story of Noah, think not of the pot of gold or the cuteness of the animals. Instead remind yourself:

1. God the creator is all powerful – he made the world an all that is in it.
2. The creator God will never use that power to destroy humankind or the animal world, no matter how evil.
3. That even our small acts of goodness and gratitude will influence God.
4. That we are called to seek and deliver justice to the sanctity of humankind and all creatures of the earth.

So God said to Noah - this rainbow is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on earth

Amen