

400th Anniversary of the Severn and West Country Flood - 30. 1. 1607

There was a shout; whistles, noises of exclamation - a roaring crash, screams, silence. Meanwhile the camera rolled taking pictures of the mighty wave as it pursued its relentless journey sweeping all before it, people, houses, trees. And as quickly as it came; so it disappeared, leaving only debris, the bodies of the dead, and horrified on lookers in its wake.

Few of us will forget the scenes from the 2005 Boxing Day tsunami as they spread across our screens that Christmas tide. Such images serve to illustrate the devastation that happened here in the villages of the Severn and Somerset four hundred years ago today.

Then, of course, there were no cameras to record the event; no newspapers. Witness statements from survivors were recorded much later. Their descriptions causing debate among modern scholars as to whether this was a west country tsunami, or a violent storm surge. What was true of both the events of 1607 and 2005, was that they came out of a clear blue sky with no warning; and thousands perished.

Such events cause us to ask questions: why did this happen; how was it caused; where was God? And in our ghoulish, sensation media driven age - when might it happen again?

Today we have come to remember. One of the villagers in Kingston Seymour whose family can be traced back to the time of the flood talked to the local vicar about the flood as if it were yesterday. In one sense four hundred years is a very short time.

Tales about floods have littered history from earliest times, and they fascinate us. One of our readings from the Bible this evening told part of the story of Noah's flood. It is a story that has been told and re-told in poems, musicals and drama. And stories are a very good way of helping us to remember. The word re-member - means to put back together; to try and make sense, and to learn from the story or experience something that will help us to live differently.

The Bible tells us lots of stories to help us to re-member. All of the stories have the same theme: they are about how God wants to bring good out of evil; peace out of war; plenty out of hunger; freedom out of oppression; love out of hatred; forgiveness out of blame.

When the tsunami hit Asia and the flood the Severn and Somerset everything changed. The landscape was different; rich people became poor; many died, and people had to think differently about the future. No longer could people feel safe. People had to think differently about God, themselves - everything.

Some people wrote pamphlets in the 17th century saying that the flood was God's judgment; that people were being punished for wickedness. Some people said the same when the Asian tsunami happened too. And believe it or not, they said it about God in the story of Noah. Certainly God is concerned about a world that is cruel and unjust, that creates poverty, injustice and death for millions of people. But do we really think that God's distress at these things would make him want to create more havoc?

Disasters make us think differently about God. When people told the Noah story, they too thought it was about God punishing people. But at the end of the story, it takes a surprising turn: God makes a promise to Noah. The promise is in two parts. The first part is a promise never to destroy creation. The second part is the promise to give life to human beings. Because the story was first told to people who could not read, the story teller tells his hearers to re-member this promise every time they see a rainbow in the clouds.

C.S. Lewis told a story about a family of children who entered a large wardrobe in their uncle's house and discovered a land called Narnia. It was a place full of sadness and fear. But a story went around of a lion, who was good, whose name was Aslan. The animals and little people of Narnia hoped he would one day bring peace to Narnia. The children discussed Aslan with a family of beavers. One of them asked about Aslan, 'Is he safe?' 'Safe?' replied Mrs. Beaver, 'Course he isn't safe - but he's good.' C.S. Lewis told the story of Aslan as a kind of picture of Jesus Christ.

God we might say isn't safe. But he's good.

In our second reading from the Bible tonight we heard of fishermen caught in a storm. The boat threatens to sink. Jesus, who is on board too, is having a nap. He seems unaware of the danger. The fishermen wake him up - 'Don't you care - we're sinking!' Jesus calls out to the elements - 'Silence. Be Still.' Everything went quiet. He seems to have gone back to sleep. But the fishermen - says the Bible, instead of being grateful - were afraid! They had to think differently about things. What would the world be like if it really could be changed - like that?!

Seas and storms in the bible always represent chaos; the cosmic forces of opposition to all that is good and life giving. In this cosmic moment, Jesus seeks to demonstrate what God really wants: an end to chaos, violence, injustice, hurt, greed, difference between people - anything that threatens to wreck what is good, or could be made good. And those who witness this are forced to ask: do we want to see evil ended in the world? Or are we too, afraid?

Jesus isn't safe. But he's good.

And that's where there is a deep paradox in the picture of God that Jesus presents. Many people expected Jesus to raise an army to defeat God's

enemies. After all if you can still storms, bringing about world peace should be easy.

But Jesus did not choose the power of armies to defeat inhumanity and wickedness. In his teaching and his witness he challenged wrong doing and injustice. But he did so as much by example as by word. Healing the sick, freeing the oppressed, he demanded of the powerful that they do the same. Like the cosmic moment of restoring stillness in the storm; people were afraid of real change that might enable all people to enjoy life to the full, to which God committed himself in the Noah story.

Jesus accepted the judgment of those who would not change. Allowing himself to be executed, he stood with all who suffer and have suffered. By his act of self giving love, he laid down a challenge for a new world. People who would follow him would practice compassion and mercy; stand with the victims whether of natural or man made disasters. He reveals a God who suffers with and for his people. A God who calls people to compassion, to care for the earth, and share its resources, to create a table where all may sit down in peace.

When I was learning the Christian faith as a child we used to sing a little chorus:

He did not come to judge the world
He did not come to blame
He did not only come to seek
It was to save he came
And when we call him Saviour
We call him by his name.

When we get our ideas about God wrong, things go wrong. We live in an age of blame. It has created a blame culture. In part this is because Christian people think God is in the blame business. Jesus, the one who is good, but not safe, founded a religion based on sensitivity to suffering - not on blameworthiness. If, as we re-member the flood, we realise how vulnerable life is, and learn to practice compassion and mercy for all who suffer, we can move from the culture of blame to one of sensitivity to the suffering of others - then we shall have re-engaged with the God who promised not to destroy creation; and the Jesus whose vision of God's justice, will satisfy all hunger and thirst; all mourning and crying; all suffering and sadness.

May the flood help us remember a God who is not safe; but is good - so that we might strive after goodness too. And if you cannot remember this sermon - just look up at the rainbow!

+Peter Bath and Wells
Redwick Parish Church, Monmouth.