

Lent 1
The Rainbow and the Cross
21st February 2021, Bishop's Sermon
Genesis 9:8-17, 1 Peter 3:18-end, Mark 1:9-15

Rainbows. They've been ubiquitous over the past year, both the real things (including a glorious double-arc'd affair that I witnessed over our local common last week), and a thousand children's drawings sellotaped to shop fronts and bedroom windows wherever we go. As a symbol, the rainbow has been passed from hand to hand in a global game of Pass the Parcel for centuries, proving one of the most enduring and versatile of all trademarks. And as the music's stopped, it's variously been deployed by political reform movements, peace activists, anti-nuclear campaigners, anti-apartheid protestors, environmental demonstrators, the LGBTI+ community, and now supporters of the National Health Service. In one somewhat confusing episode earlier in lockdown, a Plymouth Bus Company tweeted that they were planning to rebrand their buses, keeping the rainbow but replacing the Pride logo with one that thanked the NHS. The subsequent outcry as to whether the music had started up again or not, led to a change of policy, and Pride was restored, accompanied by an abject apology from the bus company.

The poets and scientists have had their own controversies over rainbows too, kicked off by John Keats, who famously reflected on how the scientific advances of his time were taking the wonder out of life, replacing the poetic with the prosaic. As he wrote in his poem *Lamia*:

*Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine—
Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made
The tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shade.*

180 years' later, Richard Dawkins took up Keats' challenge in his book 'Unweaving the Rainbow', arguing that scientific rationalism *reveals* the wonders of the universe rather than subverting them.

And as we trace the symbol of the rainbow back through human history, one of its earliest manifestations is to be found in our Old Testament lectionary reading this morning from the Book of Genesis. The flood has passed, Noah has released his family and other animals from the Ark together with a welcome command to 'go forth and multiply', God has promised that '*as long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease*'; and then two things happen simultaneously. First the Hebrew word 'berith' appears for the very first time in scripture, and secondly a rainbow appears in the sky.

'Berith': it's going to become one of the most important words in all Judeo-Christian theology, indeed the word which for the Christian separates the Old *Testament* from the New. Because 'Berith' means a testament or covenant: an agreement between two partners which sets them on a quite new legal footing:

and here in Genesis chapter 9 is the first of those covenants, later to be supplemented by God's covenants with Abraham, Moses, David, and ultimately with all who are 'in Christ'.

In many ways, this first covenant is impressive in its scope. As God said to Noah, '*I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you... that never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth*'. Every living creature is included here, not just humankind; the promise is for all time, rather than, say, a 999-year lease; and there's a generosity about the covenant here too, in that's it's unconditional and not dependent on future good behaviour.

Just one thing is missing, though, and that is any sense of *relationship* lying at the heart of this covenant, of God and humanity being drawn together into a place of mutual love and commitment. In future covenants, that omission would be remedied as Abraham and Moses, the so-called 'friends of God' would take their place alongside David, the 'man after God's own heart' as covenant partners with the Almighty. But this first covenant was more distant than that, more emotionally detached, beautiful but remote - though none the less welcome, I'm sure, as words of reassurance in Man's enduring battle with the elements.

So how about the rainbow in the sky? What was the symbolism here of this most ubiquitous of all images? Some commentators have seen it as a sign that God was metaphorically hanging up his bow, rather than using it again to execute justice. Others have pointed to God's glory as contrasted with the darkness of human nature, and to the sheer radiance of His faithfulness towards all that He has made. Still others have developed that theme 'beautiful but remote', which characterises both the 'berith' and the rainbow. And I don't know about you, but certainly to Beverly and myself, who have no difficulty in holding together Keats' perspective here with that of Richard Dawkins, the appearance of a rainbow in the sky has invariably lifted our hearts, sometimes at the toughest moments, as in the words of that old hymn, we've

*'Traced the rainbow through the rain,
And felt the promise is not vain
That morn shall tearless be'*.

Onto our gospel reading today, and there's no time for rainbows in Mark's whistle-stop tour of the early days of Jesus' ministry, which leads us from Nazareth to the River Jordan to the Judean desert and back to Galilee in the course of just seven short verses. But there is time for the heavens to be 'torn open', for the Spirit to alight on Jesus like a dove, and for a voice from Heaven 'You are my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased' before Jesus embarks on those forty days and forty nights in the wilderness.

Peter, perhaps rather fancifully, later referred to that baptismal moment in terms of Noah's Ark, with Jesus pictured as a latter-day Noah steering the boat through treacherous waters and so carrying his family to safety - that's in our epistle reading today, written to the churches in Asia Minor where Noah's Ark was widely

thought to have landed. However embattled the little churches in that region were feeling, Peter was saying, the death and resurrection of Jesus (as symbolised by his stepping down into the waters of baptism and up again) proclaimed his Lordship over all the forces that oppressed them. And while Peter's argument might be a little hard to follow here, one thing is absolutely clear: that at the heart of the story of Jesus lies the signing of a new covenant which has relationship absolutely front and centre: first and foremost the unique relationship between God and the One who is greater than Abraham and Moses and David - who is far more than God's friend or a 'man after God's own heart' - who is none other than 'my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased'; and springing from that, the relationship between God and all who are 'in Christ', as beautifully described by Peter in the first verse of our epistle reading: *'For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God'*.

And so to Lent 2021: and as today's readings present us with some rather sombre locations - Noah's world emerging from a global catastrophe, Jesus' wilderness with wild animals on the prowl, Peter's little churches feeling fragile and embattled - we are all too conscious of the dark backdrop of this Lent for many people - and especially for those most affected by *our* global catastrophe, or most challenged by the fears that stalk them in the night-time, or most anxious about the fragile and embattled nature of the churches in their care. In normal times, it's easy to ignore the season of Lent, or to pay it lip-service by giving up chocolate for a bit or cutting down a little on our alcohol consumption. But this year it feels as though Lent has been thrust upon us, indeed perhaps that we've been living Lent for the best part of 12 months. And while I hope there've been moments of joy for you during this time as well - and while there's a rising confidence in our national vaccination programme together with a growing hope that life may return to normality some time soon - there's also a greater seriousness to Lent this time round than normal. The trivial, the superficial, the shallow seem somehow out of place in the face of all that we've been through together.

The rainbow may be a powerful symbol of hope this Lent, not least in the lap where it's most recently landed - an expression of our thankfulness to the NHS and our trust in the vaccination roll-out programme. But interestingly rainbows hardly figure in the New Testament, other than a couple of times in the Book of Revelation where they encircle the throne of God. Instead a new symbol comes along to take its place, which exchanges the beauty and remoteness of the rainbow for something that could hardly be uglier or more in your face. For if the sign of the first covenant was a rainbow, the sign of the last is an old rugged cross. Or, to put it more graphically, this is a covenant signed in the precious blood of Christ, the One whom, as the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, is 'the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises' (8:6).

The truth perhaps is this: that alongside our prayers for an increasingly effective roll-out of the vaccination programme, not just here but across the world, we should equally be praying for an increasingly effective roll-out of the gospel programme, not just here but across the world. For these better promises of a better covenant are quite remarkable in their scope and ambition: not something beautiful and distant, but something upfront and deeply personal - nothing short of

what St Peter described as a *'new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is unperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you'* (1 Peter 1:3-4).

And so to close with a great benediction for this Lent from the Letter to the Hebrews:

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever, Amen (Hebrews 13:20-21)