

Sermon Archive 331

Sunday 21 February, 2021

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Genesis 9: 8-17
 Mark 1: 9-15

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Kia Ora koe. It's always slightly awkward beginning these sorts of conversations. In the olden days I used to just say "Thus says the Lord"; and people knew what that meant. They also tended to fall on their faces, sacrifice themselves to fear, and stop listening out of awe. Eventually I found a way around it, by speaking through a person - with a human face, a human voice, a human manner - a human mind and heart - totally human. That seemed, at least for a while, to work better - and was actually more true to how I loved to be in genuine, mutual interaction. Ha! Hard to be in mutual interaction when they say to you, across a few glasses, "well, what do you do?" and I have to say "I create the world".

Anyway; in our former interaction, the world and I, we found some difficulty. I'd created them for a kind of being that was open and loving and kind and good. And it hadn't quite worked out so well. One day I looked upon how it was going, and none of that (the open, the loving, the kind, the good) was anywhere to be seen.

Now, I will tell you that I wasn't a baby God, but my story was told in those olden days by people who perceived me in particular ways, that these days you'd say were babyish. Revolting against the lack of goodness, I threw a flood of water on the earth and drowned most of what was there. So the story went; you know people project all sorts of things on gods when bad things happen. Blame this group, blame that group, blame any group. Preserve the dignity and the right of the god.

So they did, and I was seen to have cleansed the earth of its wickedness by a flood.

Well, maybe they began to think in a more sophisticated way about me, or

maybe I prompted it in them. We'll never know - your cosmology will guide you. But the story of the flood wasn't going to be ended until I'd had a chance to say "sorry; I'll never do that again". Destruction is never the way, people; never the way.

I decided, and they recorded my deciding, that I would hang this most massive, from here to there, big, colourful, beautiful and gorgeous, outrageously large sign over the whole earth, as a sign of "never again".

How do you say "sorry", and "never again", if you mean it, other than by the largest, most flamboyant, ridiculously "over the top" sign that hangs over the whole sope of the world? A rainbow! Colours arching over the whole wide world. A gargantuan thing stretching over our houses and churches, our wee alcoves where the rough sleepers sleep, the flash private schools where the children learn, the parliament houses where servants decide, the supermarkets where shoppers incessantly chat! Above it all, above their coming and going, their rising and falling, their breathing and dying, hangs a rainbow - a big, colourful, unavoidable sign of commitment and love!

That's what I've done, in the hope that it'll be noticed. Notice it, you all!

-ooOoo-

Here's another voice -from somewhere beneath the rainbow.

I've listened, occasionally, to well-meaning preachers trying to present their deity as someone who's grown up from the smiting and flooding infant god. And I admire them; I really do. They're trying to add texture, experiential nuance to the simple model of holiness, sin, punishment. Almost as if they've seen God grow into an expression where heaven and earth have had to talk, have had to share "how they feel". God save us from talking about how we feel! But blessings on them for trying to humanise the great untouchables of heaven. You know, in the olden days, with which I'm more familiar, when heaven and earth came together, the earth ended up flooded, and humanity apologetic, and God apologetic, and nothing much being good. Just God saying here's a rainbow to stand for something. And God hoping that a rainbow would be spacious, and vast, and shiny and unmissable! God making a new yearning to be kind and faithful obvious through a magnificent bow tied around the sky.

From here, though, I see this rainbow "thing". It's edges are vague. It comes and goes; one moment it's there, looking lovely; then it's gone. The scientists tell me it doesn't really exist - it's just a trick of the light - some passing combination of sunlight and raindrops. It doesn't exist. And even if I think I can see it one day, I can't the next. Manna may be a loyal daily bread; but rainbows? . . .

I'm told it's been given as a sign of faithfulness. But it comes and goes. So what am I to make of that? Faithfulness through a sign that comes and goes.

In my cynical moments, it seems like smoke and mirrors. The Creator sees it as the most that can be done to draw our wonder to the faithfulness and new start of heaven! I see it . . . and then don't. A trick of light. Where did that rainbow go?

-ooOoo-

Here's another voice - the voice of someone on a Lenten journey.

In my own life, I have been part of that moving from the god who doesn't get humanity, to the One who does. My whole life has been part of that evolution. Not that I'm there yet. There may be things ahead - disappointment by my friends, thirty pieces of silver, crosses on a hill. We need to leave that till later.

But for now, I have to say I'm trying to live the rainbow. I'm trying to be, for others, someone who will make it easier to believe that heaven is kind, that God is with us, that someone is committed to keeping the flood at bay - that the forces of good are wanting for the world not to be drowned.

And in service of trying to live that rainbow, I've stepped forth into this journey I feel is being required. I feel that the cause needs people to be true. It needs people to be strong. It needs people to be selfless. It needs people to be free from attraction to all the shiny things, the baubles and sparkles, the backdoor deals that steal the heart.

So, I find myself in a bit of a wilderness, where I have to work this out. What is good to seek? Who am I to be? Whom will I not worship? What is my purpose in this seeking of the good and the God?

As my followers tell the story of my working this out, my great wrestling with my conscience, my high negotiation with commitment, what will they say? They will say that when I was tempted, God sent me angels - angels who ministered to me.

You're left with nothing but the story. And you may find yourself wondering, with that story, "what angels might that be?"

Aren't angels as passing as rainbows? Tricks of light? Things that are there, but not really there? Have you met an angel? There one day, gone the next? Leaving you wondering about beginnings and ends. Beautiful in their time, but soon a memory and a doubt?

Is this how God sustains me, as I work out who I am, and how I am to assure the people that God is with us (through me)? Rainbows and angels!

-ooOoo-

Another voice. And this one is mine - the voice of Matthew.

I believe that a pledge has been made, from the mystery of the One we call "God", that the love which made us, will keep us - not destroy us, but keep us. I believe that the story says ways are found of assuring us that we shall be kept in care. I believe that the One called Jesus found a way of making that real, a long, long time ago. I believe that there are signs of this around us, rainbows, bread, wine, people doing kindness, gatherings like this, people saying "I am your friend", encouraging us to embrace the care, and indeed to pass it on to others.

Though we perceive it as a tiny little flag, God offers it as a great banner over the whole of our life.

On the way to the cross, Christ begins his journey to make the rainbow, the angel, rather more real.

We keep a moment of quiet.