

A New Beginning - Genesis 6:11 - 7:1 & 9:18-27; Matthew 24:37-44

The Mediterranean fruit fly is one of the world's most destructive pests. It is particularly lethal in citrus fruits but also attacks pears, peaches and such like. As you may know, the larvae of fruit flies and other insects do not eat their way into the fruit from the outside. Rather, the insect lays the egg in the blossom. The fruit grows around it; sometime later the worm hatches inside the fruit and eats its way out.

Why am I talking about that? Well, last week, looking at the Hebrew scriptures, we thought about the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden. They had put their trust in the serpent who had told them that they could become like gods when they actually had been already told by God that they had been made in his image and so did not need anything extra. Because they did not trust God, they had to be banished. You have probably heard of Cain... Adam & Eve's first son. Imagine the joy and hope of that first couple as they looked into Cain's tiny face and reflected on God's promise to send a deliverer through the seed of the woman. Many Bible scholars think that Adam and Eve mistakenly thought Cain was the promised deliverer that we heard about - Eve's seed. But no...He killed his brother Abel out of jealousy and anger. Yet he was given another chance by God with an opportunity like the one he gave Adam and Eve that we heard about two weeks ago - to rule over sin in the same way as he had invited them to rule over the animals and the rest of the earth. But in both cases they failed the challenge. Sin is like that. It begins in the human heart and, if unchecked, works its way out in thoughts, words, and deeds. As with the Mediterranean fruit fly, it takes quick, vigorous action to deal with it and root it out. If you let it go, it gets the upper hand, resulting in terrible destruction.

Adam & Eve's descendants sped out across what is now modern-day Iraq. It is known as the cradle of civilisation because many anthropologists today believe that humanity traces back to one original couple from the region. Humans became more rebellious and evil. If you read Genesis 4 & 5, you will be introduced to both the families of Cain and of Seth, Adam's other son who gets a mention - he probably had many more children - and two things stand out. The first is that humans become more and more rebellious. One of Cain's descendants, Lamech, was renowned for violence, boasting of his exploits. The other, though, is that we are told people began to call on the name of Yahweh, the God with whom they could have a relationship. And one of those who walked that way was Enoch, who is mentioned in the New Testament both in the book of Hebrews and the book of Jude. The scriptures say that he did not die - he was just taken away. Enoch was Noah's great grandfather. And so we get to our first reading...

For many today, the idea that the God of the Bible is good and loving conflicts with moments in the Bible of violence, judgment, and bloodshed. How could a good God send a flood to destroy the earth? Yet sin and evil were only intensifying. How would God react to this state of humanity?

Just before the story of the flood begins, we learn that "the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" and it grieved God "to his heart". But there was one righteous man - Noah.

Was he a real person? - I'll let you ponder that but, as we heard in our gospel reading: *As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away.* Noah also appears in seven more places in the Bible as well as in other Jewish literature and the Koran.

Noah was told to build an ark when the world was not seeing any rain. It was a huge boat with specific dimensions that gave it the capacity to carry a load of animals. If you have seen any film about Noah - perhaps Evan Almighty with Steve Carrell or Noah with Russell Crowe - you will have picked up that he

was mocked and jeered at for being so ridiculous. Yet he continued as he had a relationship with God that spurred him on and kept him going. He was told to take onto the ark two of every kind of animal, so it would become a micro-Eden, carrying forward all the land animals and birds created in Genesis 1. Also, there would be a new righteous man and his family in the garden, all, according to the scriptures, living peacefully together. Perhaps Noah was to be the seed that God had spoken of?

So God sent the floodwaters as a judgment and carried Noah's family through the flood unharmed to start afresh in a world returned to innocence. It is a new beginning and a chance to have a different end. And God even commissions Noah, as he did Adam. It is as though he has pressed the reboot button on his computer...

Yet you still might be saying, "But no matter how you tell the story, God still wipes out all of humanity except one family!" How does the flood reflect the goodness of God when it meant such disaster coming on the earth? The Bible Project's Andrew Forest makes three observations from the context of the story.

1. *Just Mercy*: The story of the flood is one of God taking merciful action to restrain humanity's ever-increasing evil. Genesis tells us that God saw that "every intention of the thoughts of man's heart was *only evil continually*" In the Bible, context means everything. Genesis firmly anchors the meaning of the flood in the context of God's intervention to stop humanity's headlong slide into evil.

2. *Grief, Not Vengeance*: God doesn't take pleasure in the flood. Rather, Genesis highlights how the wickedness unleashed by the Fall caused him sorrow and grief. God made the earth to be a place where humanity could flourish, but instead they turned it into a theatre of violence and disaster. And God's heart was broken.

3. *The Curious Climax*: This comes from the last part of the Noah story. God blesses Noah and his sons and, as he does in Genesis 1, tells them to be fruitful and multiply. But there the similarity stops, as veganism makes way for humans now being allowed to eat meat. Later on, when Isaiah the prophet remembers Noah, he doesn't think of the flood but the covenant God made with Noah afterwards. "*To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth*". In that covenant, God promises that nothing like this will ever happen again. This points to the key meaning of the story: the flood is about God's mercy and commitment to the goodness of what he has made.

Yet there is a final twist. Let's listen to what Andrew Ollerton of the Bible Society says: After the flood, "*a new human family steps out into creation to try again. But our condition is revealed by what happened next. Noah gets drunk, passes out in his tent and is humiliated. The world has been given a wash, but something is wrong on the inside.*" One of my favourite speakers, Canon J John says this: "*the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart*". It goes back to the Mediterranean fruit fly....

Our reading finished with Noah blessing two of his sons... Shem - from whom the Jewish race would descend - and Japheth. He cursed - it is the same Hebrew word as God used when addressing Adam, Eve and the serpent - Canaan whose father had shamed Noah in some way. Canaan's family would be a torment to the Israelites in years to come. And so the wash hasn't worked. What will happen next? Join us at Little Ness next week to finish this section of Genesis.