

I wonder what image you have of our first reading today?

Whatever picture you have in your mind, it's probably quite picturesque – animals spilling out onto the earth and a rainbow above. A world ready to revert to how it was at creation. However, after the flood God knew that it would be impossible for the earth to return to how he intended it to be at the time of creation. At the very beginning, God intended there to be no violence between humans or between humans and animals.

However, in Chapter 6 of Genesis, we hear that God saw that humans were wicked, and constantly turned their minds to evil thoughts. This was why God sent the flood – to wipe out those with whom he was upset. After the flood we have a covenant that God makes with Noah and his family – the one group that found favour with God. The covenant was that God would never again bring a flood on the land to destroy all flesh, and this covenant was signified by the rainbow.

Now, notice, in our Old Testament reading that there is nowhere that God requires something of Noah or any of the other animals in return for this promise.

The biblical meaning of covenant is that it's a gift. A gift made by a powerful one to a less powerful one. The covenant was from God to Noah, his descendants and every living creature that was with him in the ark. The gift is the gift of life: never again will God bring a flood on the land to destroy all flesh. In making this covenant God had to be realistic, understanding that there couldn't be a return to the

ideal way of life that was intended at creation, as the inclination of the human heart is to evil (Genesis 8:21).

So, we've been given a gift – the gift of life – but God has recognised that we'll struggle to look after that gift in the way that was intended at the time of creation.

I wonder if he ever realised the true extent to which humans were going to plunder the earth's resources. It's not just that we've been eating meat, but we've destroying the plant life too and there's an increasing level of violence towards each other. God made his promise not to destroy all flesh, but some might argue that we're actually doing a pretty good job of it ourselves without God's help.

Now, I don't want you to think that I'm arguing that it's all too late and we might just as well give up trying to stop ourselves in our self-destructive behaviours. No, but I do want to be realistic about our situation. I did some research and found that worldwide there are approximately 400,000 deaths that happen each year from homicide; 130,000 due to armed conflict of one sort or another; and just over 26,000 due to terrorism. These are numbers that are way too high and yes, they warrant the attention that they get on our news and in our prayers, but there are other human deaths which happen every year indirectly as a result of the behaviour of other humans and get nowhere near the same attention. For example, worldwide deaths that result from drunken driving have been estimated at 273,000. And currently it is estimated that worldwide 150,000 deaths

happen every year as a result of climate change. By 2030 this will rise 250,000 a year due to:

- natural climate related disasters, such as flooding, extreme heat and wildfires;
- changes in rainfall and temperature which increases water-borne disease, such as diarrhoea and malaria;
- and still more due to changes in food production which results in malnutrition.

We can see that homicides, armed conflict and drunk driving affect people in the localities where the bad behaviour takes place. And the impact of climate change on people in Europe and the US is widely reported and makes the news where there's flooding or wildfires because it's unusual. But it takes a specially focussed service for our prayers to extend to the impacts that happen every day in Burundi or Zimbabwe. Otherwise, we don't hear about it. It's as if the deaths haven't happened.

We also have a great history in the Church of not wanting to exclude those who we might put off if they disagree with something that's preached on. And this can prevent us from taking a stand on issues. In a blog written earlier this week, Bishop Jonathan, Bishop of Croydon, said that the future of the church is in parishes being communities of action – being the conscience of our locality and a leader in witnessing for a change in society. If we can keep up the message about how many deaths are caused by our self-destructive behaviours, maybe action will be taken by those who can make changes

to corporate and governmental policies and practices around the world.

But currently, through our silence, governments continue to focus on maximising economic output, whatever the cost. Analysis by the conservation charity WWF suggests that in the last UK budget, £40 billion was dedicated to policies that will increase carbon emissions (for example, opening new North Sea oil fields and expanding our airport capacity). That's over 250 times the amount to be spent on environmental measures.

I think that we've an in-built human motivation against violence towards others – there was widespread condemnation of the recent shooting in Plymouth and the deaths of people in Kabul and the rest of Afghanistan. For Christians and other monotheistic faiths, this is based on the law taught in the early books of the bible – Genesis through to Deuteronomy. The command to love your neighbour as yourself is in Leviticus 19:18 and, in our gospel reading today, Jesus picks this out, together with loving God more than anything else, as the two greatest commands in the law that all the others spring from.

To what degree then can we as individuals, as a church community and as a nation, follow this inbuilt human motivation in the way in which we act? I'd like to think that we can do something towards saving lives through reducing our impact on climate change at each of these levels:

- As individuals we can make changes to those things that we spend our money on, or the extent to which we

reuse or recycle our rubbish. September is a time of new starts in the world of education and often other parts of society follow this pattern. So, as an example of such a change, I've recently switched to more environmentally friendly products for use in clothes and dish washing. I have also committed to travelling more by cycle, bus and train than by car – we'll see how that one works out.

- As a community, we could have study courses or evening meetings that focus on environmental issues. There'll be many programmes in the next few months in the run up to the COP26 climate change conference and we might use some of these as a focus for home groups, or other discussion groups.
- And we can endeavour to influence those who will meet at that conference in November to ensure that the UK and other governments from around the world will hear about the climate injustice that is currently faced by the very poorest of people.

Christian Aid are running a campaign to speak out for justice and to stop the climate crisis by creating an installation of thousands of prayer boats at COP26. There are instructions to create a prayer boat in each of the church buildings and they will be included in next week's pew sheet. They also formed one of the activities at August's Messy Church. Please leave your prayer boat(s) in one of the churches and they will be gathered together for our own display at the end of the month before being sent to Christian Aid to form part of their campaign.

If you're feeling a bit more active, there is a pilgrimage and a prayer vigil for COP26 taking place at Southwark Cathedral on Saturday 23rd October – again more details will follow in future pew sheets.

God's gift in the covenant that he made after the flood is something to be celebrated and responded to. Jesus showed us the way to respond to this gift of life and summarised this by reference to the two greatest commandments, which are foundational to our faith – loving God and loving our neighbour. How these impact on our own lives will depend on how radical you want any change to be. Influencing others in their behaviours has to be part of our response as well.

Rather than seeing the story of the flood as an ideal plan for the earth that there's no way we can meet (after all, there are already many thousands of animal species which have been wiped out), let's be realistic about the crisis situation that we find ourselves in, and recognise that there are thousands of human and animal deaths every day that are caused by climate change – the result of everyone's past behaviours. How can we change our behaviours of the future to reduce the impact on those in the most disadvantaged lands?

Amen