

Lent 1, 1 March 2009, CCSY
Gen 9:8-17; 1 Pet 3:18-22; Mk 1:9-15

It's a little awkward to be presented with the flood story – even the 'happy' ending thereof – on a Sunday when our nation is still reeling from a spate of natural disasters. From our reading context, and with the Boxing Day tsunami not yet a distant memory, the thought of God using such a catastrophe as an instrument of correction – even of regeneration – is distasteful, to say the least. Of course we are dealing here in these first eleven chapters of Genesis with myth, in the best sense of that word: *muthos*, 'a telling'. Here is an attempt by the biblical writers to tell – to give a storied account – of their experience of life in the world under God.

The evangelist employs this same technique at the start of Mark's gospel, from which we'll be reading for much of Lent. Here Jesus' baptism signifies a radical break with the religious, social, and political structures of his day, marking the beginning of his mission to challenge these same structures in so far as they had become oppressive.

The sense in which his baptism thus makes him a kind of 'outlaw' is reinforced by the fact that he appears in Mark's narrative quite literally out of 'nowhere'. In this account of Jesus' origins there is no sign of Matthew or Luke's highly credentialed genealogies or miraculous birth stories. In fact the region of Galilee is notorious as a place of seething discontent: a grindingly poor, northern, predominantly Gentile outpost, regarded with suspicion and contempt by the more powerful city-centre of Jerusalem.

No sooner have these lines of opposition and conflict been sketched, than Jesus is pitched into the centre of an apocalyptic combat myth: the heavens are torn open, and Jesus is Spirit-led into the wilderness – that site of Israel's great struggle with the god-like Pharaoh – to wrestle with demons, and be ministered to by angels.

Again, unlike Matthew and Luke, we are given no details of the content of this testing, although at key points in Mark's gospel it plays out on a political level, as Jesus is tempted by his opponents to compromise himself and his mission: a temptation against which he will warn his disciples on the eve of his own eventual and inevitable arrest as the 'baptismal outlaw' that he clearly is, from this opening scene of his ministry.

None of this, it has to be said, makes baptism look particularly attractive! Perhaps it's just as well we tend not to perform it during Lent – so confronting are the seasonal biblical images which attach to it, both in terms of the fate for which it marks Jesus, and the ancient political and mythological conflicts it evokes, in which, as our second reading puts it, the few are saved through a watery ordeal.

For the writer of 1 Peter, however, the ancient myth of the flood is interpreted not as punishment or cleansing but as a type of the new creation that comes with baptism into Christ: the new Adam. This salvation through water is effective not because it removes dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God by virtue of Christ's resurrection as both the first fruits and final goal of this new, water-born creation, in which the original blessing and balance of Eden is to be restored.

With this renewed creation, therefore, come renewed responsibilities.

Compared with its ancient Near Eastern counterparts – most famously, the Babylonian deluge myth, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* – the biblical account of a primeval flood is unique in its repeated reference to non-human living creatures once the waters subside. Unlike that with Abraham, the covenant established here through Noah is between God and the whole earth (9:13). In these ten verses, there are no fewer than nine references to ‘every living creature’ or ‘all flesh’. And three times Noah is reminded of the animals who were ‘with him’; as Jesus is ‘with’ the beasts in wilderness.

Whereas, in the story’s internal logic, the flood begins as a consequence of divine grief at human evil, by the story’s end that nexus between corruption and destruction has been broken – much to the chagrin of those who would preach such an abhorrent doctrine in the wake of tragedy. The covenant embraces the whole earth, without condition, affirming the creator’s abiding intention that creation’s essential goodness be preserved, notwithstanding the human propensity for violent self-interest. In such a vision, ‘man and beast are linked in weal and woe’,¹ bound together, mutually accountable within that longest of bows: God’s promise to future generations.

To be baptised into such a promise is to be held likewise accountable under God’s covenant with all flesh, with every living creature, with the earth itself: not because eco-theology is trendy; nor even because the alternative is becoming all too obvious to our generation; but simply because the cries of earth have ever been heard and heeded at the throne of grace: the same mercy-seat before which we bend at this Eucharist.

And for those of us baptised into such a promise in this land, there is a further resonance with the mythology, the ‘Dreaming’ of indigenous Australians, for whom the rainbow is always an assurance of the benevolent presence of the Creator Spirit; for whom the earth also emerged from beneath the great waters, revealing along with itself the Creator who always suffers when the land suffers – a Creator who, as Moses came to realise by the burning bush, is as close as the ground on which one walks, the rock – be it Uluru or Mount Ararat – on which the ark of creation’s hope may rest.²

Perhaps in this light, we might change one word in the last verse of our Gradual hymn: ‘When our turn comes to be tempted, as we meet each vital choice, make us wise and wake us willing, Lord of life to heed [earth’s] voice.’ Doing so is surely one of the cosmic, if not apocalyptic, struggles to which our bearing of the mark of Christ – in water and oil, or in ash – commits us: in our households, in our parish, as Church, in the face of the constant temptation to self-interested compromise – as individuals and as a culture.

Our unwillingness to stand baptismally outside that prevailing ‘lore’ – the persuasive and pervasive myth of our human-centredness – in solidarity with the beasts, to listen for earth’s voice – even, or especially, in the heart of the city – may well be a cause for repentance; but not despair.

For God’s memory and patience are as long as ours are short.

- Richard Treloar

¹ Karl Barth, as cited by John Olley, ‘Mixed Blessings for Animals: The Contrasts of Genesis 9’, in *The Earth Story in Genesis* (EB2), 130-39, and here at 137.

² See Wali Fejo, ‘The Voice of Earth: An Indigenous Reading of Genesis 9’, *The Earth Story in Genesis* (EB2), 140-146.