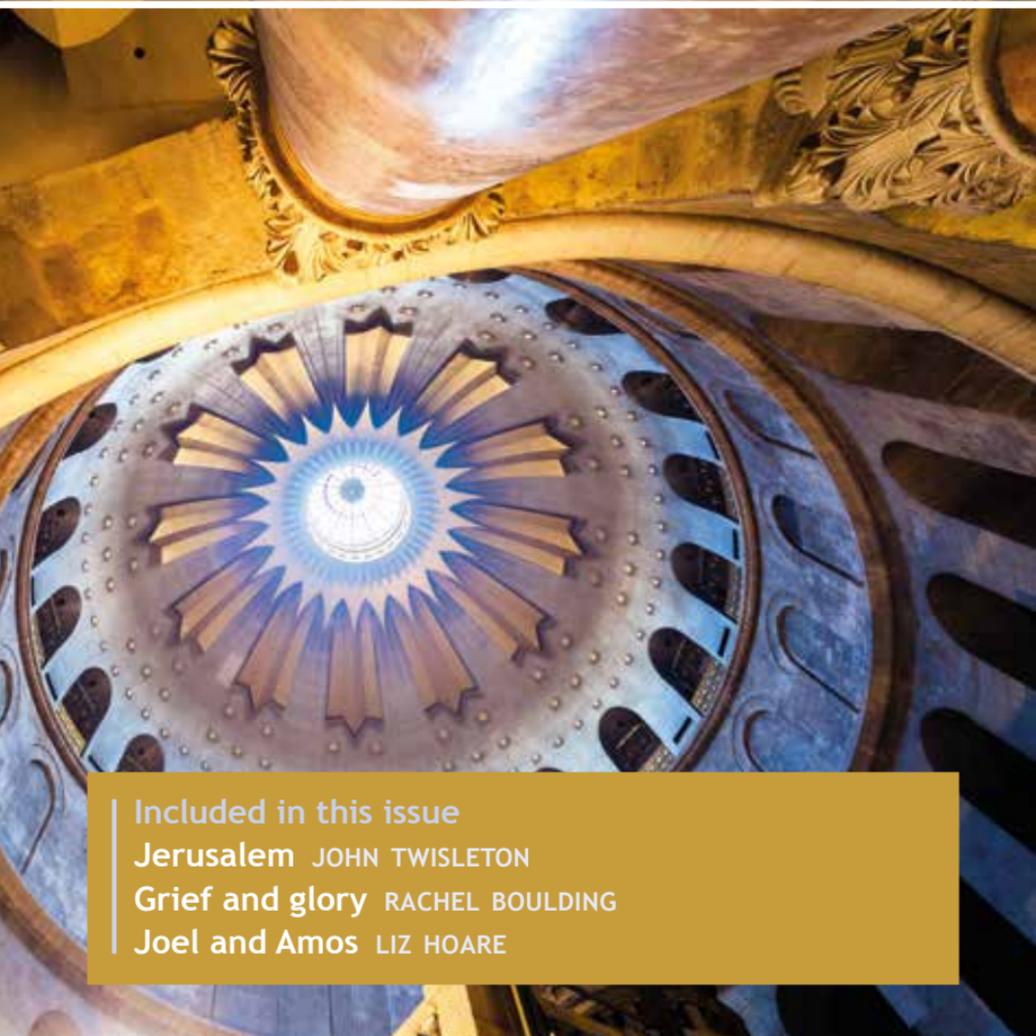


JANUARY-APRIL 2018



New Daylight

Sustaining your daily journey with the Bible



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Grief and glory RACHEL BOULDING

Joel and Amos LIZ HOARE

New Daylight

Edited by **Sally Welch**

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Suggestions for using *New Daylight*

Find a regular time and place, if possible, where you can read and pray undisturbed. Before you begin, take time to be still and perhaps use the BRF Prayer on page 6. Then read the Bible passage slowly (try reading it aloud if you find it over-familiar), followed by the comment. You can also use *New Daylight* for group study and discussion, if you prefer.

The prayer or point for reflection can be a starting point for your own meditation and prayer. Many people like to keep a journal to record their thoughts about a Bible passage and items for prayer. In *New Daylight* we also note the Sundays and some special festivals from the Church calendar, to keep in step with the Christian year.

New Daylight and the Bible

New Daylight contributors use a range of Bible versions, and you will find a list of the versions used opposite. You are welcome to use your own preferred version alongside the passage printed in the notes. This can be particularly helpful if the Bible text has been abridged.

New Daylight affirms that the whole of the Bible is God's revelation to us, and we should read, reflect on and learn from every part of both Old and New Testaments. Usually the printed comment presents a straightforward 'thought for the day', but sometimes it may also raise questions rather than simply providing answers, as we wrestle with some of the more difficult passages of Scripture.

New Daylight is also available in a deluxe edition (larger format). Visit your local Christian bookshop or contact the BRF office, who can also give details about a cassette version for the visually impaired. For a Braille edition, contact St John's Guild, Sovereign House, 12-14 Warwick Street, Coventry CV5 6ET.

Comment on *New Daylight*

To send feedback, please email enquiries@brf.org.uk or write to BRF at the address shown opposite. You can also tweet to [@brfonline](https://twitter.com/brfonline) using the hashtag [#brfconnect](https://twitter.com/brfconnect).

Writers in this issue

Ian Adams is a poet, writer, photographer and priest. He is the author of *Cave Refectory Road*, *Running Over Rocks* and *Unfurling* (all Canterbury Press). He is the Church Mission Society's Spirituality Adviser and is a Fresh Expressions Associate.

Amy Boucher Pye is the author of *The Living Cross* (BRF, 2016) and the award-winning *Finding Myself in Britain* (Authentic Media, 2015). She enjoys running the Woman Alive book club and speaking at churches. She blogs at amyboucherpye.com.

Rachel Boulding, who died of cancer in April 2017, was Deputy Editor of the *Church Times*, and the author of *Facing Death* (BRF, 2017) and *Companions on the Bethlehem Road* (BRF, 2012).

Liz Hoare is an ordained Anglican priest and teaches spiritual formation at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford. Her interests lie in the history and literature of Christian spirituality and their connections with today's world.

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Veronica Zundel is an Oxford graduate, writer and columnist. She lives with her husband and son in north London. Her most recent book is *Everything I Know about God, I've Learned from Being a Parent* (BRF, 2013).

Sally Welch writes...

The beginning of a new year can be a challenging period. After the colour and activity of Christmas, the days can seem gloomier and damper than ever; the nights are long and cold; and we are in danger of falling prey to the ailments of the season. Opportunities for fun are limited, perhaps, by the need to tighten our belts after a period of indulgence and it can seem a long time indeed until the first signs of spring arrive. But even in these shaded times, there are reasons for optimism. Resolutions can be made, new patterns created, new habits begun. Seeds of growth can be planted in our hearts and souls which, if carefully tended, can bring forth a spiritual fruit to benefit us all.

To help you with this time of preparation and beginning, there are some wonderful reflections and insights within this issue of *New Daylight*. Naomi Starkey examines the implications of discipleship and the importance of keeping our minds focused on the main thing – ‘the testimony about God... Jesus Christ and him crucified’ (1 Corinthians 2:1–2). Discipleship is not without its struggles, but there are plenty of people to help us on our journey – John Twisleton is a wonderful travel guide as he helps us to explore the ancient city of Jerusalem and all that it means for the children of God, and Liz Hoare takes us gently through the challenges of those Old Testament prophets Joel and Amos, leading us to greater understanding and appreciation.

We approach Holy Week with Ian Adams’ sensitive exploration of some of the most famous passages concerning that time, and finally arrive at Easter to experience the enormous privilege of sharing this festival with Rachel Boulding, who occupies that liminal territory of one who was given less than a year to live at the time of writing her notes. Her reflections, filled with hope and joy and the vital importance of filling each day with a sense of thankfulness, are powerful and moving – a true flowering of the spirit in the midst of apparent darkness; a witness to the eternal love of God.

I thank God for her and for all of you this season.



The BRF Prayer

*Almighty God,
you have taught us that your word is a lamp for our feet
and a light for our path. Help us, and all who prayerfully
read your word, to deepen our fellowship with you
and with each other through your love.
And in so doing may we come to know you more fully,
love you more truly, and follow more faithfully
in the steps of your son Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns
with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for evermore.
Amen*

Where it all started: Genesis 1—11

When my parents cleared my aunt's flat in Vienna, as she was going into a care home, they found family tree information she had gathered, some of it going back as far as 1699. Various TV programmes following people tracing their ancestors, and the plethora of online genealogy sites, show our deep desire to know our origins. I've just read that the two questions everyone asks each other in Bali are, 'Where are you going?' and 'Where have you come from?'

The ancient stories in Genesis are an attempt to answer that second question; and often the answer to the second can give us insight into the first. We can read these stories, as many Christians do, as straight history, and attempt to date and coordinate them. Or we can see them as stories about humanity, which are true at all times, and which tell us not so much what happened in the past as what we are still like.

Talking serpents, worldwide floods, people living to nearly 1,000 – what are we to make of these strange tales? The important thing is to take these accounts seriously, though not necessarily to take them literally. The Bible's authority does not always lie in its historical accuracy (though at times this is important, particularly in the Gospels); it lies in its ability to tell the truth about the human condition. The story of Eden, for instance, emphasises not that there was a talking serpent at a particular time, but that humankind is always flawed and inclined to evil and, equally importantly, that this could be different, that we have the potential to be clear reflections of God.

Ultimately there is no such thing as 'straight history', as every historian knows. Each account of events has a particular bias, depending on who the historian thinks are the 'baddies' and who the 'goodies'. Often history is told from the perspective of the winners. The remarkable thing about the Bible is that it tells the story of a people who were often the losers, a vulnerable nation at the mercy of greater powers. These chapters are the background to that story, and they portray a world where, despite human failing and corruption, God is always working for the good of humankind.

VERONICA ZUNDEL

Called to care

Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness... So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’... God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

My late mother once said she enjoyed gardening because she could ‘impose her will’ on the garden! Is this what the ‘dominion’ mentioned in these verses is all about – human beings imposing their will on the earth? If so, maybe some environmentalists are right when they say this passage has done untold harm to our threatened planet.

But notice the first thing God says here about the creation of human beings. They are to be ‘in our image’. So, what is God’s attitude to this world? Does God ‘impose his will’ on it? It certainly doesn’t look like it – God gives us, and the earth, freedom to live and develop. We have the choice of doing good or evil. Our God-given ‘dominion’ over all nature is not a licence to exploit it, but a duty to care for it, to develop its potential and preserve its balance. In a term popular these days, we are called to ‘curate’ the earth. Our care of creation is to mirror God’s care of it and us.

In the Genesis 1 story of creation, this is the only part that God pronounces not just ‘good’, but ‘very good’. Humanity is not a curse on the earth, but its crowning glory. Note those parallel phrases: ‘in his image’, ‘in the image of God’, ‘male and female’. Both sexes are equally formed in God’s image.

In her book Eat, Pray, Love (Penguin, 2006), Elizabeth Gilbert says human beings have two basic questions: ‘How much do you love me?’ and ‘Who’s in charge?’ The creation, and the cross and resurrection, answer both.

VERONICA ZUNDEL

Bone of my bone

Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.’ So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them... The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.’

Do you understand the opposite sex? I’m not sure I do. It’s impossible to tell what’s due to nature and what to nurture, but it’s clear that we often think and behave differently, even though science can find little difference in our brains. In some ways, every marriage is a cross-cultural marriage!

Yet look at this alternative story of creation (the different name for God suggests this may be by a different writer from Genesis 1). All the emphasis in the man’s speech is on the likeness between the sexes, not their difference. The animals cannot be his ‘helper’, because their capacities are so far below those of the man – they don’t even have speech. Yet when the woman appears, the man recognises a counterpart, a creature corresponding to him. Here is someone who can communicate with him, love him back, make up what is missing in his own personality.

The word *ezer* (helper) used here is always used in the Bible of an equal or a superior, most often in the phrase ‘God is my helper’. This is a companion, not an assistant.

Where have you seen true communication between the sexes?

VERONICA ZUNDEL

The blame game

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ He said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.’ He said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?’ The man said, ‘The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.’ Then the Lord God said to the woman, ‘What is this that you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent tricked me, and I ate.’

A few months ago I posted on my Facebook page, ‘If at first you don’t succeed, blame someone else.’ It’s a strategy as old as humanity: in families, in politics, even in churches. We never want to admit our own mistakes or wrongdoing. Men blame women (and vice versa), siblings blame each other, incoming governments blame the previous government.

If you read the judgement of God which follows, however, God curses no one but the serpent, who after all initiated the deception/temptation. God’s speeches to the man and woman predict the consequences of sin: domination of men over women, a daily struggle to work enough for a living. These are descriptions, not prescriptions; they describe reality in a fallen world, not an eternal decree.

Even in the curse on the serpent, there is a promise of redemption: ‘[Humanity] will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.’ A blow to the head is more destructive than one to the heel: does this suggest human victory, in Jesus, over evil? Certainly the results of the fall are meant to be reversed in the kingdom of God. Humankind here travels from innocent nakedness to shame and the need to ‘cover up’. You don’t have to take this as literal history to see this as a true picture of our condition.

Pray for situations where there is inequality or oppression.

VERONICA ZUNDEL

The killing field

Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain... Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell... Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let us go out to the field.' And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' He said, 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?'

I've recently been diagnosed (for the second time) with cancer, which may require radical surgery. I'm grieving for what may come and, as anger is one of the symptoms of grief, I'm angry with everyone and everything, especially God. But I don't want to get stuck here, or take it out on others (except God – God can take it, having taken worse...)

We are not told, in this mysterious story, why Abel's offering is accepted, while Cain's isn't. It may be a folk story of the early days of agriculture, explaining conflict between herders and settlers. It's more useful for us to focus on Cain's murderous response. Furious with God, he acts out his anger by killing his brother. I don't suppose anyone reading this is a murderer (though it's possible!) but we cannot congratulate ourselves on refraining from killing, for we have likely all had near-murderous thoughts against someone, at some point in our lives. What do we do with them? Instead of expressing them in words, deeds or refusal to care for others, can we instead take them to God, asking for them to be transformed into forgiveness and love?

Cain's question can only be answered with 'Yes'. We are indeed our brother's, and our sister's, keeper, responsible for how we act towards, and think about, others.

'All who hate a brother or sister are murderers...' (1 John 3:15).

VERONICA ZUNDEL

A man's man?

Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch; and he built a city, and named it Enoch after his son Enoch. To Enoch was born Irad; and Irad was the father of Mehujael, and Mehujael the father of Methushael, and Methushael the father of Lamech. Lamech took two wives... Lamech said to his wives: 'Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say: I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.'

Personality traits can get handed down through the generations, not only genetically but in 'family culture'. From violent Cain descends violent Lamech, who treats wives as possessions and boasts of his capacity for revenge. This makes more sense of the provision 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth' (Exodus 21:24) as a limitation of violence, which we need to read as '*only* an eye for an eye' – instead of a Lamech-style escalating vendetta.

It's only recently that I've noticed an extraordinary parallel between this passage and what Jesus says to Peter, when Peter asks how often he should forgive his brother: 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times' (Matthew 18:22). Surely Jesus is thinking of this statement of Lamech's? In the kingdom of God, unlimited vengeance (seven was considered a number of completeness, so seventy-seven stood for 'as far as you can count') is turned into unlimited forgiveness. Jesus follows his statement with the parable of the unforgiving servant, showing that our ability to forgive is grounded in experiencing God's forgiveness of us.

This is difficult for those of us with a keen sense of justice, who may find it hard to forgive others for deliberate acts of unkindness or neglect. We may also feel, if we have lived a fairly 'respectable' life, that there isn't much God has had to forgive us for. However, I find that the older I get, the more I'm aware of the potential nastiness inside me, and of the divine love that still cares for me despite my failings.

Where in the Bible can we find good models of masculinity?

VERONICA ZUNDEL

Redemption and blessing

Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, for she said, ‘God has appointed for me another child instead of Abel, because Cain killed him.’ To Seth also a son was born. At that time people began to invoke the name of the Lord... When Enoch had lived for sixty-five years, he became the father of Methuselah. Enoch walked with God after the birth of Methuselah for three hundred years, and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him.

A lost child can never be replaced, as many parents, including my own, have experienced. Even so, the birth of Seth is a sign of redemption, a new start for the archetypal human family. And the more descendants, the greater blessing. God had, after all, told humankind to ‘be fruitful and multiply’ (Genesis 1:28). In developing countries, children are still an insurance for old age.

‘At that time people began to invoke the name of the Lord.’ Why just then? Gratitude for God’s gift of children? A wish to restore the relationship lost in Eden? It strikes me that before the fall, when people could (in picture language) hear ‘the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden’, there was no need to ‘invoke the name’ – God’s presence was an everyday reality. Now in this compromised world, exiled from paradise, God seems far away and people feel they have to start calling, maybe even shouting. And yet Elijah hears God in ‘a sound of sheer silence’ (1 Kings 19:12) and Paul says that ‘in [God] we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28).

Enoch ‘walked with God’ – an echo, perhaps, of God ‘walking in the garden’. And because his life is different, his death is also different, holding no fear or pain.

What does it mean to you to ‘walk with God’?

VERONICA ZUNDEL

The sorrow of sin

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, 'I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created – people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.' But Noah found favour in the sight of the Lord.

If this were a submission for a creative writing course, the tutor would immediately mark down the first sentence. Too many hyperboles: 'great', 'every', 'only', 'continually'! Yet this style conveys to the reader just how total the corruption of humankind is. It affects thoughts, motivations, actions, relationship with creation. No wonder God appears to be giving up on people...

'It grieved his heart.' The degradation of humanity does not call forth anger in God, but sorrow. It is a picture of a parent whose children have all gone astray, full of pain and regret for the innocence they used to have. And then... there is a 'but'. 'But' is always an interesting word in the Bible, and here the 'but' is that there's a snag in God's plan – there is at least one human who does not deserve to be destroyed. This reminds me of the bargaining between Abraham and God about the fate of Sodom, where God promises not to destroy the city if even ten righteous people are found there – but there are none (Genesis 18:22-32).

If we read the news, or use social media, we might be forgiven for thinking that not much has changed since the days of Noah. Every day there is some new atrocity, tragedy or dodgy dealing to report. We need to be aware, however, that good news rarely sells, and that there are many deeds of compassion and justice going on which we may not hear about. Our world still contains many Noahs.

'The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart' (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn). Do you agree?

VERONICA ZUNDEL

Covenant love

God said to Noah, ‘I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch... For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives with you. And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female.’

We are not told how Noah feels about the destruction of ‘all flesh’. Is he sad that his neighbours and perhaps friends will perish? Perhaps it is better not to ask – this is after all a story about the righteousness of God and the unrighteousness of humanity, and its lines are drawn boldly and broadly.

What we do know is that, along with Noah and his family, God plans to rescue breeding pairs of every kind of animal. This, the first plan of salvation in the Bible, is not about rescuing a few humans and letting the rest of creation hang. There is no mandate here for believing that salvation is about snatching a minority of people from the earth and destroying everything else. Instead, there is a clear message that the fate of humans and that of creation are of equal interest to God. Concern for nature is therefore central to our Christian faith.

This is also the first mention in the Bible of a covenant, a solemn agreement, between God and humankind. A covenant is a bond between partners, where each side commits to certain actions and behaviours. You might call it a contract, but it is deeper than that – it is an ongoing relationship, with an emotional and spiritual dimension.

*Is there anyone with whom you feel you have a ‘covenant’?
Pray for that person.*

VERONICA ZUNDEL

Costing not less than everything

The flood continued for forty days on the earth; and the waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth... But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided... At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark... and sent out the raven; and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. Then he sent out the dove... but the dove found no place to set its foot... He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the dove from the ark; and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth.

My neighbour had a flood last year caused by a blocked bathroom basin. Already traumatised by a horrific bereavement, she was deeply affected by this damage to her home and her sense of security. Even without literal flooding, some people's lives seem to be a constant flood of painful events. And not everyone has an 'ark' – a church community, a supportive family, a circle of friends – to keep their head above the waters.

Noah is safe, but at the cost of everything he has known before: home, neighbours, property, security. To find salvation, he has to leave all else behind. But then, isn't this true for us all? Jesus told his followers: 'For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it' (Matthew 16:25, repeated in all four Gospels). As the disciples commented, 'This is a hard saying.'

Yet really, how secure are we ever, knowing that disaster can strike anyone at any time? Far better to surrender false security for true – for when we are in God's hands, tragedy may still happen, but Emmanuel, God-with-us, is by our side.

*If there is part of your life you haven't given to God, pray about it now.
If you feel 'flooded', pray for dry land.*

VERONICA ZUNDEL

A sign of commitment

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ‘As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.’ God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.’

There’s a Charles Schulz ‘Peanuts’ cartoon in which it is raining heavily, and Charlie Brown wonders whether the whole world will be flooded. Linus reminds him of God’s promise to Noah. Charlie says, ‘You’ve taken a great weight off my mind.’ ‘Sound theology has a way of doing that,’ answers Linus.

I can remember earnest Christians saying we shouldn’t wear rainbow jewellery or clothing because ‘It’s a New Age symbol’. To offer some ‘sound theology’, I’d remind them that God got there first! But you can’t have the rainbow unless you have both rain and sun. No rain, no rainbow. Or as Julian of Norwich put it, ‘Sin is behovely [necessary/inevitable] but all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.’

I’m currently reading Hannah Hurnard’s wonderful allegory *Hind’s Feet on High Places* to my neighbour. For (rather unwanted) companions on her journey to the High Places, the Chief Shepherd gives Much-Afraid the veiled figures of Sorrow and Suffering. Yet when she finally reaches the summit, she finds they have transformed into Joy and Peace.

God’s covenant is not just with Noah and his family, but ‘with every living creature’, reinforcing God’s love and care for the earth (and why would any artist not love their own works?). Does this apply to the ‘new covenant’ in Jesus too?

*Pray for anyone you know who is going through suffering
(this may include yourself).*

Drunk and disorderly

Noah, a man of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank some of the wine and became drunk, and he lay uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backwards and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness. When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said, 'Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.'

In biblical culture, nakedness brought shame on the person who looked at it, not on the person who was naked. This gives force to Jesus' command, 'From anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt' (Luke 6:29); this would leave the person naked and shame the one who had taken the clothes.

So in this strange story, Ham is shamed by his action of seeing his drunken father in the nude – and yet he even boasts of it to his brothers. With Ham's alternative name of 'Canaan', this might have been told to justify the Israelites' capture of Canaanite land as related in later books. It may also have been a warning against drinking too much, which affects the family of the drunkard as much as the one who drinks!

Sadly, it has also been used to justify racism, with 'Ham' standing for darker-skinned races, whom white people regarded as destined by God to be their slaves. This illustrates how dangerous it can be to take isolated bits of the Bible as 'proof texts' to reinforce a view you already hold, rather than seeing the broad themes of the Bible pointing to love of God and neighbour.

What then should we make of Noah's drunkenness? We can certainly see it as a reminder that none of the 'heroes' of the Bible, male or female, are flawless; that even our best deeds are 'like a filthy cloth' (Isaiah 64:6) when compared with God's holiness.

Pray for those addicted to alcohol and for their families and friends.

VERONICA ZUNDEL

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Origins

These are the descendants of Noah's sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth; children were born to them after the flood... The descendants of Ham: Cush, Egypt, Put, and Canaan... Cush became the father of Nimrod; he was the first on earth to become a mighty warrior. He was a mighty hunter before the Lord; therefore it is said, 'Like Nimrod a mighty hunter before the Lord.' The beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, and Accad, all of them in the land of Shinar. From that land he went into Assyria, and built Nineveh, Rehoboth-ir, Calah, and Resen between Nineveh and Calah; that is the great city. Egypt became the father of Ludim, Anamim, Lehabim, Naphtuhim, Pathrusim, Casluhim, and Caphtorim, from which the Philistines come.

'Basil didn't know what "begatting" was, but it seemed there was a lot of it about in those days.' So thinks a small boy in a video by Taffy Davies, on reading passages like this, which in older translations would read 'Cush begat Nimrod... Egypt begat Ludim' and so on. There was indeed 'a lot of it about'!

Biblical genealogies can be baffling or boring to us, though to their original hearers, they were a fascinating account of their ancestors, like the programme *Who Do You Think You Are?* Even now we can pick out highlights. Take Nimrod, a descendant of the 'cursed' Ham: both a hunter and a warrior, he lives by killing; yet he lives 'before the Lord'. For ancient people, hunting and war were about survival, and no one questioned them; for us, who follow the Prince of Peace, it is a different matter.

Then there's the mention of Babel, which will be significant later; and Nineveh, 'the great city' which will feature centrally in the book of Jonah. And Caphtorim (possibly Crete), 'from which the Philistines come'. Major actors in the Old Testament are introduced here.

I suspect the main message we can draw from this is the clear idea that the whole human race, or at least that part of it known to the ancient Jewish people, has a common origin. No one is born superior or inferior.

*What ethnic or cultural groups do you find it hard to relate to?
How could you get to know them?*

Bigger than yours

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there... Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.' ... And the Lord said, 'Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech.' So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.

As the daughter of refugees, I was brought up with two languages. This gave me a lifelong love of words and a head start in learning other languages. The diversity of languages can be seen as a wonderful expression of human creativity. Or we can see it, as here, as a barrier to different peoples understanding each other.

This is another 'origin story', explaining the multitude of languages. As with the sin of Eden, it is a human attempt to 'be like God' – something which, ironically, Genesis 1:27 tells us we already are. Throughout history, humans have always built towers to display wealth and power: think of the Italian town of San Gimignano, a medieval 'tower race', or the competition to build the tallest building in the world.

Why is God here so keen to limit human capabilities, to make it harder for us to work together? No doubt because we have shown ourselves able to unite for great evil (such as the Nazi regime my parents fled). The story of Pentecost, however, where all can understand each other's languages, shows that in the kingdom of God, barriers are broken down and we can work together for great good.

'If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal' (1 Corinthians 13:1).

VERONICA ZUNDEL



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