

**St. Ninian's Parish Church**  
**Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> December 2019**  
*Matthew 24: 36 – 44*

*First in Advent*

Formed just over fifty years ago in King's College, Cambridge, the popularity of The King's Singers, an *a cappella* vocal ensemble, peaked in the 1970s. It was kickstarted by their recording of the Ivor Novello Award winning cantata called Captain Noah and His Floating Zoo.

Captain Noah and His Floating Zoo is the story of the days of Noah, those days referenced by Jesus in the Gospel reading the morning, "As things were in Noah's days, so will they be when the Son of Man comes," he says.

Captain Noah and His Floating Zoo was written for children, and it is very popular with children. I should know. For about a year between the ages of 5 and 6 my son Aidan demanded to hear the King's Singers rendition of Captain Noah and His Floating Zoo in the car wherever we were going, whenever we were going there. It is about 25 minutes long, so in most car journeys you get to hear a fair bit of it. I know Captain Noah and His Floating Zoo well.

We all know well the story of Noah's Ark, I think. It is an Old Testament story from the beginning of the book of Genesis. God commands Noah to build an Ark to save his family and a selection of animals, which enter the Ark two-by-two, before God causes a catastrophic flood to destroy all other life on earth.

Aidan loved listening to the King's Singers' version, and he revelled in the idea of two-by-two. As I said, the cantata was written for children to enjoy. Unfortunately, however, the original story from the Book of Genesis was not written for children, and that is why Aidan quite quickly noticed a problem with the story, one that is not easy to explain to a 5-year old.

Isn't it a bit cruel and bloodthirsty to send the entire human race, bar one family, to its doom in a flood no matter what the reason? Even though the reason for the flood is referenced by the King's Singers only briefly at the beginning of their cantata, nevertheless Aidan heard it and understood it, and persistently asked me why God would destroy everyone - indeed everything - on earth apart from one family.

If you know the story of Noah and the flood, do you know the answer? Why would a God we believe to be loving, merciful and forgiving destroy everything?

The answer lies in the story itself, but also in the overall story that surrounds it. The Flood comes at the end of the prologue to the book of Genesis, chapters 1 – 11. This prologue sets out God's creation of the world and all that lives on it. What follows the Flood is the story of Abraham, and the Bible's focus on one tribe of people that will continue pretty much for the rest of the Bible. But the prologue, Genesis chapters 1 – 11, sets the scene.

In these first eleven chapters God creates the world as we know it; and creates it good, with one exception. In the first chapter of Genesis human beings are revealed to be that exception. They are created, but uniquely the creation of human beings is flawed; not on purpose, almost by accident. In the second chapter of Genesis that flaw and the reason for it is revealed; human beings have knowledge of both good and evil.

If you want to understand the Bible, if you want to understand God, if you want to understand Christianity, if you want to understand yourself and the world within which you live you need to understand this fundamental problem that is set out right at the very beginning of the Bible. Human beings are flawed, they know both good and evil.

The story of Noah's Ark and the Flood doesn't just appear in the Bible. It is a story that appears throughout the traditions of the Ancient Near East told by many people, many times. But, only in the Bible is it told in this way. In other accounts the god of the story destroys people and the world with a great flood either as an arbitrary act with no explanation, or because there are too many people living in the world; overpopulation.

The story in the Bible is the only time that God destroys the world because of the evil that people do. It isn't people specifically that God chooses to destroy, God wants to rid the world of evil.

This problem of how to rid the world of evil is consistent with the plot of the Creation story right from the beginning in the first chapter of Genesis. How do you fix a problem like evil when, in human beings, it is inseparable from good? At the beginning of the Genesis story he tried punishing human beings with expulsion from Eden. Then, in the story of Cain and Able he tried admonishing human beings with guilt.

Neither of these worked, and by chapter six of Genesis evil has spread everywhere across the earth. What is God to do? He decides the only thing he can do is to reverse his creation, destroy everything, and start again with one family who are wholly good. Do you think that is a good plan?

Well, we modern humans know how God feels, because this problem has been set before us a number of times in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and we too had to decide. How should the evil that pervaded Japan in the early 1940s be rooted out? Like God in Genesis our allies decided to destroy everything, and dropped two nuclear weapons. How should the evil that pervaded Germany in the 1930s and 1940s be rooted out? We pretty much laid Germany to waste. We did the opposite in Rwanda in the 1990s when the evil of genocide took hold. There, we didn't intervene. Was that the right thing to do?

After the Flood God realised that he made a mistake. He immediately promised he would never do it again, but more than that it he realised that destroying everything to rid the world of evil didn't work. Evil made a return, it came back, it hadn't been completely destroyed. It is with us still.

What do you do about a problem like evil when it is mixed in with good? The story of Noah's Ark is the story of God trying to start again in order to solve this problem, but that didn't work. The Old Testament then tells stories about other ways by which God tries to solve this problem: he set aside a tribe to be an example to everyone else of how to live together without being evil; he established laws, ten commandments, in order to keep evil contained. Just like the Flood, these didn't work either. What do you do about a problem like good and evil?

Finally, in the Christian story, God settled on an answer; he would change the hearts of each and every human being from the inside, one at a time, acknowledging that this probably wouldn't work, but that if people at least tried then he would forgive them their evil acts. And he started with a baby, someone who couldn't possibly be accused of being evil. Change one person, and set that one person up as an example to everyone else.

In this Advent and Christmas season that is the story that we retell to ourselves and to others. In these seasons we retell a story that reminds us that this world is made of good and evil, light and darkness, right and wrong. We remind ourselves that the good and evil we do affects everything that lives on this earth. We remind ourselves that this is a problem that probably can't be fixed, but that we need to try to fix it because if we don't evil will spread everywhere.

The retelling by Jesus in this morning's reading of the story of Noah sounds a more hopeful note than we might at first think. Although we might feel a sense of dread when we hear Jesus' words, "As things were in Noah's days, so will they be when the Son of Man comes." Who would want to live in days like Noah's? Nevertheless, the promise that God wouldn't again destroy everything in order to rid the world of evil is maintained, "... there will be two men in the field; one will be taken, the other left..." said Jesus, suggesting that it will be possible to separate out good from evil, wheat from chaff, sheep from the goats. "Keep awake, then; for you do not know on what day your Lord is to come."

When Aidan hears Captain Noah and His Floating Zoo and asks questions about God and the morality of wiping out everyone on earth, it's not easy to explain. After all, Aidan is not an adult, he is only 6. He has an understanding of good and evil, but it is far from fully developed.

We, on the other hand, are adults. What you do about a problem like good and evil, is our problem to try to solve. If I had a pound for every time I hear someone say that Christmas is for the kids really then I'd be rich, and I'd have a happy Christmas. Christmas isn't for the kids, it's for adults. It is, so far, the best answer to the problem of good and evil that anyone, including God, has come up with.

When we celebrate communion together, we are committing ourselves to the Christian answer of how you solve this problem. Together, we are keeping the light shining in a dark world where the innocent are too often crucified. Together, in the face of death, we are keeping alive the child that was born in Bethlehem. Together, we are separating the light from the darkness. On the fateful night when Jesus was arrested his disciples fell asleep. This morning Jesus says, "Keep awake, then; for you do not know on what day your Lord is to come."