

On Wednesday afternoon I thought I should look at the readings for this Sunday again. As I began to read the passage we heard from Genesis, the heavens opened and another heavy shower of rain pelted down – the car park was starting to look like a small pond at points on Wednesday, and so I couldn't help but sing the song of Noah's Ark – *The Lord said to Noah there's going to be a floody, floody!*

I was thinking about this having returned from visiting two different families who had had very unexpected things happen over the last few years and are managing great change in their lives. We all live with change every day, but some changes in life like losing a partner, or coming to terms with an unexpected move, or health issues often take more time to process.

Noah is dealing with a lot in the Genesis story, disappointment at the evil within his community, moving his family and a zoo into a boat, his faith in God, his hope for the future. In so many ways the flood narrative is a story not of good or evil, but of patience, perseverance and faith. The ability to judge what are the important decisions, the one's worth enduring ridicule for, the ones worth bringing your whole family along with. The ability to trust in what God is calling you to do and follow that through regardless of the cost.

On the same day I was sent a video clip by a friend. In the clip – some you may have seen it

A trainer walked around a room while teaching stress management to an audience. As she did so, she raised a glass of water. Everyone expected they'd be asked the old "half empty or half full?" question. Instead, she asked, "How heavy is this glass of water?" The answers ranged from 8 oz to 16 oz.

She replied, "The absolute weight doesn't matter. What's important is how long I hold it. If I hold it for a minute, it's not heavy. If I hold it for an hour, I'll have an ache in my arm. If I hold it for a day, my arm will be numb and feel paralysed. In each case, the weight of the glass doesn't change but, the longer I hold it, the heavier it becomes".

She continued, "The stresses and worries in life are like that glass of water. Think about them for a while and nothing happens. Think about them a bit longer and they begin to hurt. And if you think about them all day long, you will feel paralysed – incapable of doing anything".

It's important to remember to let go of your stresses. Put your burdens down when you can. Don't carry them for hours and days and months¹.

Within the period of three short hours I felt like I had watched a flood, visited people overwhelmed by floods, and then been reminded that the challenge is not to hold onto the flood and let it overwhelm us.

¹ <https://www.emotionalintelligenceatwork.com/resources/glass-water/>

So much of what we encounter in life might fall under these headings, though they are rarely squashed into such a short period of time, but it was good reminder in this Easter Season that the joy of the resurrection invites us to reflect on how we help one another carry what we must carry, and put down what we need to put down.

One of the reasons that we hear the story of Noah today is because it is about how we trust God, and the care that God took for Noah and his family. We focus in on this part of the story, rather than the more complicated images which relate to the destruction of the rest of the community around them – both the environment and the people. The flood narratives are hard to take in many ways, and yet they are intended as illustrations which help a people of faith understand that decisions have consequences, and also that when we trust in God – God will save us. I suspect that this still does not make the story any more palatable, but I hope it places it in context. These stories are designed to help us think about what shapes us, and who God is within this.

But at the heart of this story is the truth that God knows us (or Noah) and Noah (humanity) knows God. This too is the point of the story which Jesus is sharing in John 10, when we have a series of narratives about being a Good Shepherd and what it is to understand that Jesus is the shepherd of his flock. Again not an image we might relate to well in central London!

Today is often referred to as ‘Shepherd Sunday’ – a liturgical Sunday when we focus on this image and concept. We are all on a journey, part of the community of faithful people in this place – a people who have different skills and abilities – and Jesus uses the Shepherd image to support this. I know my sheep and they know me. We know God and God knows us – and no matter what challenges we might face, the point this fact about God will never change. The way we understand that statement may change, and even the way we communicate what we believe may change – but what is solid in all of this is the faithfulness and strength of the God whom we are called to serve.

When I was a child I used to think sheep were quite stupid – if they know you and recognise you they will follow you wherever you go. If you walk in the river, they walk in the river. As a sheep farmer, at times this can be handy – because if you are trying to move a mob of sheep you just have to ensure that one trusts you and the rest will follow! As I grew older I realised that sheep were not stupid – but quite astute – they don’t just follow anyone – they will only follow one that they trust – one that has food – one that will protect them – if they sense fear or danger they will run as fast as they can in the opposite direction.

What is interesting about sheep is that like humans at times they seem to have both faith and doubt at the same time. On the one hand they trust you as their shepherd, but if you are leading them into an unfamiliar place they may doubt they are going in the right direction. Jesus understood this. He is attempting to address the doubt

that is amongst them, but also the potential of the faith which he is offering; to only carry what is needed.

The reality is that while at one level doubt is the mirror image of faith, they are also companions. Even the most faithful will doubt at times, it is part of our humanity. But even in the midst of our doubt, Jesus does not change.

Jesus is telling the doubters that he is one with God, that he knows his followers, and that they know him (verse 26-27). He is continuing a strand of teaching from earlier in the chapter. He is using the same vivid image of sheep to describe his followers from the Good Shepherd passage (10:1-18). And he is declaring that he knows all who follow him and they know him for who he is.

So what do these two passages say to us as a community – here in this place?

Firstly that God knows us – that God knows our hopes and dreams, but also our fears and doubts about the journey in front of us – and into this the Gospel brings a message of peace and grace – a place that we can be hopeful and hope filled for the way that we serve God in this place.

Within this hope is the assurance that the Good Shepherd knows us, does not ask us to hold onto more than we can carry; and we are called to listen for the voice of God in this place and to follow into the new places that this voice calls us. We are invited to engage fully in our relationship with God – reminded that in this Eucharist each week, we stand around this altar together as one people before God – and with all faithful people – as a community – as one.

Yesterday I was in this space with 7 curates who are to be ordained as priests in 7 weeks' time. We were reflecting on how they offer leadership at the Eucharist in the communities in which they work. I was struck by their honesty and their acknowledgement that they simultaneously feel excited and scared. The full reality of what it means to be a person who is a leader was coming to feel very real for them. Leadership as Noah found not only takes courage, but means an ability to live with consequences that may be out of our control. And yet equally there is comfort in the knowledge that God knows us and is with us, wherever we may find ourselves in the leadership we offer.

Jesus wanted to reassure his disciples as he prepared them for the days which were to come which is why he said to them *'My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.'*

Whatever we are facing at present, let this reassure us as well. May it give us courage to not only hold firm to our faith, but also to pray for one another, on this day and always. Amen