**Lent 1 Sermon 21 February 2021 from Colin Hurford**

With this sermon, I feel as though I am at the top of a hill looking down on a river which meanders here and there - I’m afraid I meander around a bit.  The reason is that since we use Old Testament readings in Lent, I felt I ought to preach on the first lesson but at the same time, the Gospel reading is so important that I must say something about that as well.

I want to start with a person called John Colenso, a Mathematician and Priest who was made Bishop of Natal in Africa in 1853.  He was asked by a Zulu Christian if he truly believed in the story of Noah and was the first Anglican Bishop to expose the unhistorical character of the story.  This put him at odds with the established belief, and I quote from a standard training work of the mid-nineteenth century, “the Bible is none other than the Voice of Him that sits upon the throne and every syllable is a direct utterance of the Most High”.  Also, in one of Bishop Colenso’s books, he stresses that God loves every race on earth, and that God’s aim is to defeat sin rather than to punish those who sinned.  His views were far in advance of his time and eventually he was excommunicated - but John Colenso took no notice and continued to act as Bishop!  So following his example, when we read the story of Noah we look, not for historical truths but for spiritual truths.  What can we learn from the story of Noah?

Looking at the world today many get depressed to see how much evil there is in it - wars and horror stories about the cruelties of war. Super-rich people when many are starving. Rich nations bagging the vaccines.  Refugees, people trafficking, drug abuse and all the rest. Well, the people who wrote down the story of the flood, two and half or three thousand years ago, thought exactly the same. The world was so evil that God decides to destroy it!  Our present day abuses are nothing new and sadly, according to a prophecy of Jesus about wars and rumours of wars, earthquakes and famines, it won’t get much better.  That is how things are and it’s no good spending time worrying about it.  We simply have to get on following Jesus and helping to grow God’s Kingdom and leave the rest to Him.

The second point in the story is that God establishes a covenant.  The meaning of covenant is disputed.  It’s possible that the original meaning of the Hebrew word was “to cut” because in very early days, an agreement between two people was sealed by cutting their arms and mingling their blood.  I think I would prefer to use a solicitor.  This developed into passing between two halves of an animal as in the very ancient story of God making a first covenant with Abraham.  The Bible is full of covenants and the word Testament in our familiar Old and New Testaments of the Bible is simply a translation of the word Covenant.   Perhaps the nearest meaning of “Covenant” in our language of today is “a solemn agreement or bond.”  It can be between two people or nations or it can be simply be a very solemn promise as in the story of Noah.  God makes a covenant or solemn promise that he will not destroy the world again.  He will tolerate its wickedness.  And the covenant is sealed by a rainbow. Although we know now how rainbows are formed, we can still appreciate their beauty.  The brilliant bands of colour against a dark background of cloud can today symbolise the faithfulness of God even when the outlook to us seems bleak and dark.  When we see a rainbow, it can remind us of God’s love especially in sending Jesus to die for us.

And that does bring me to the Gospel reading which is about Jesus.  Thinking of covenants, remember the words of Jesus which we use every Communion Service, “This is my blood of the New Covenant which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins”.   As in the very old covenants, the covenant is sealed by the blood of Jesus.  I believe there are two parts to this covenant.  The first is a solemn promise to the whole world.  ‘“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”  Remember words written by Bishop Colenso that God loves every race on earth.  The second is a solemn agreement between Jesus and those who believe in him, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” I believe in both these truths.  Somehow or other, God will save the whole world through Jesus, bringing everyone to a belief in him.  Everyone will come to the cross of Jesus either in this life or the life hereafter.   And second that those who believe in Him now already have all our sins forgiven and can work with Jesus now.  This brings us to the Gospel reading.

Jesus is baptised, filled with the Holy Spirit and then driven into the wilderness to be with God and to work out how to fulfil the task God has given him. While He is there, the devil tempts Him to choose wrong ways of doing the job.  Jesus chooses instead the way of suffering as prophesied by Isaiah.   He establishes the new covenant through suffering and death.

I said at the beginning that the sermon meanders a bit and the last couple of sentences are on a slightly different theme.  The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove.  Jesus, the perfect man, needed the power of the Holy Spirit to enable him to know what path to take and to do the work of teaching, preaching and healing.  How much more do we need the Holy Spirit to do the work Jesus has called us to do?