

# Saved through water

The sermon given by Rev Sheila Cameron at the St Margaret's Sung Eucharist  
on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, 30 April 2023

The readings were: Genesis 7; Acts 2:42-47; John 10:1-10



The story of Noah and the Flood is one that has been of enormous significance throughout the church's history, for very early on Christians began to associate it with baptism. We read in 1 Peter 3:18-20 that before Christ came to reclaim the lost, very few were saved: indeed only eight souls were saved "through water" in the days of Noah. This reference to salvation "through water" has forged a link between the story of Noah and the Christian sacrament of baptism, and therefore the story of the Ark appears in the lectionary in the Easter season, a time traditionally associated with baptism and the instruction of the newly baptised.

It has a wider currency, however. At the beginning of Lent, the story of Noah is linked with the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan (Lent 1 Year B). Numerology comes into this a bit, for it involves the number forty which is very significant in the Bible. Following his baptism, Jesus was in the desert for forty days and forty nights, and, in the story of Noah it rained for forty days and forty nights; and then, after it had stopped raining, and the flood waters began to recede and the tops of the mountains became visible again, there

was a wait of another forty days before Noah sent out a raven to see if there was any landing place. Both stories point to forty-day periods of preparation, for both Noah and Jesus: hence the six weeks of Lent in preparation for Easter, and now these six weeks we're in between Easter and Pentecost, as we await the coming or "outpouring" of the Holy Spirit.

Such Old Testament stories are the foundation of our Christian narrative and our New Testament or covenant with God through Jesus Christ. In the first covenant that God made with humans, he reassured Noah, who was a good and godly man, that he would never again destroy the earth; and, as we read in Genesis 9, the rainbow was given as a sign of that promise. The earth had become an evil and violent place but the Flood brought a fresh, new world living in a new relationship with its Creator. Our Christian baptism is a sign of our covenant with God through Christ: a covenant of *grace* offered unconditionally. All we have to do is accept in *faith* the offer of salvation through Christ, for we have inherited eternal life by being baptised into his death and resurrection.

The early Christians saw Noah as a character who called people to repentance; according to Clement of Rome, for example, writing around the year 96, "all who listened to Noah were saved."<sup>1</sup> The Ark soon came to be seen as prefiguring the Church, which came to be called the "ship of salvation."

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<sup>1</sup> *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ch.7





We retain this idea in our architectural terminology; the “nave”, the central aisle in church buildings, comes from the Latin *navis*, meaning “ship.” In the early church, those receiving instruction and awaiting baptism were allowed into a part of the church called the narthex (a waiting area at the west end of the nave), but not into the nave itself, for that was reserved for those who had been baptized, who had entered the church via the font at the west end.<sup>2</sup>

In the 16th century, the English Catholic martyr Edmund Campion warned that Christians must make sure they were safely aboard the vessel: “If you wander and walk abroad ever-so-little,” he wrote, “if you carelessly thrust hand or foot out of the Ship ... you shall be thrust forth: the door is shut, the ocean roars, you are undone.” Campion was emphasising, of course, his belief that the Roman Catholic Church was the only safe ship of salvation. The Protestant reformers predictably rejected this idea, insisting that only the Word of God could claim to be the vessel of salvation.<sup>3</sup> This was mirrored by the abolition of the central nave in many Protestant churches and its replacement by the pulpit as the central focus. The Catholic Church still uses the metaphor of the Ark confidently, however, and the image has found significance for many young people through the work of Jean Vanier, who founded *L’Arche*, (or “The Ark” in French), the movement to establish places of refuge and welcome for adults with learning disabilities, a movement which has attracted many thousands of young Catholics and many from other denominations. As I may have mentioned to a few of you, a year spent in the *L’Arche* community in Edinburgh was a very important part of my own formation for ministry back in the early 2000s.

The Ark was a community of salvation, and we read that God shut Noah, his family and the animals inside the vessel until the waters had subsided (v.16). There’s a tradition in some churches, including the Church of Scotland, of closing the doors as soon as the service begins. This may seem unfair to latecomers, but it appears to originate in the story of the Ark, where the idea was that the closed doors protected the people inside from the danger outside. Anglicans and Methodists don’t like doing that, because we want as many people as possible to join us; we don’t want to appear *exclusive*. At the same time, however, we do still believe that we are called by God to live *apart from the world*: in what one modern theologian<sup>4</sup> has called the “Christian colony”. Yes, Noah and his family were shut into the Ark *in order to be saved*. And in today’s gospel Jesus described himself as the “gate of the sheep,” the one through whom we pass to obtain the safety and salvation of the fold.

Our reading from Acts tells us that the early church was a *close*, but not a *closed* community. It was, in fact, very open in the sense that all were welcome, for “day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” Peter’s sermon in response to the event of Pentecost drew in no fewer than three thousand people who repented, were baptized, and joined the Jerusalem church (2:37–41).

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.antiochian.org/author/morelli/ethos\\_orthodox\\_catechesis\\_4](http://www.antiochian.org/author/morelli/ethos_orthodox_catechesis_4)

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis 7* at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xiii.i.html>

<sup>4</sup> Stanley Hauerwas





There were four elements to their life: “teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers.” Property was held in common: an ideal which has been impossible to maintain; but the selling of possessions and goods and distributing the proceeds to the needy remains a vitally important expression of our Christian commitment, as we are reminded by Christian Aid Week that is approaching in May.

Jesus calls himself “the gate of the sheep.” He is declaring himself to be the only one who can provide access to the salvation of God, to the green pastures of the Kingdom celebrated by the Psalmist. There’s only one gate to this particular sheepfold. The suggested movement in Jesus’ metaphor is both an inward one, into the safety of the fold, and an outward one, into the peaceful pastures where he provides our spiritual nourishment.

And why is Jesus the only means of access to salvation? Because as the Good Shepherd he knows each one of us personally; he calls us individually by name. We are all uniquely precious to him and his call is to come out of our individual isolation, to become members of his body. He laid down his life to save us and then took it up again, as he puts it in the verses following those we read today from John 10 (vv. 17–18), so that those who follow him might do likewise and enjoy life in its fullest abundance. To him be the glory, now and forever. Amen.

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Our photograph is of a section of the 11th-century murals illustrating the books of Genesis and Exodus on the ceiling of the barrel-vaulted nave of the Abbey Church of Saint-Savin-sur-Gartempe, in Poitou, France.

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