



Donal Dorr

# The Covenant with Noah and Care for the Earth

Last month I wrote about the Covenant between God and the Jewish people and then about the New Covenant established by Jesus and spelled out at the Last Supper which was the first Eucharist. I want now to share some thoughts about the Covenant with Noah which the Bible tells us took place much earlier. In fact, the scripture scholars tell us that this biblical story is so ancient that it is more a matter of myth than of regular history.

The word 'myth' has two very different meanings. The most common meaning is 'something that is not true'. But the word 'myth' also has another far deeper meaning. It means a story that tells us a really important truth, but tells it in a more poetic manner rather than in a purely literal historical form. All of the great religions have stories of this kind and the Jewish scriptures are no exception. For example, a moment's thought makes us realise that the story of Jonah being swallowed by a great sea monster and surviving there for three days cannot be a historical event. We must see it instead as a touching story—a myth—which the biblical author is using to teach us a vital message about the mercy of God, extended even to foreign nations. The Church recognises that the inspired scriptures include poetry, prayers, parables and other stories as well as history.

Over the past one hundred years it has become clear that the story of the worldwide flood and Noah's Ark is not a literal account of a strictly historical event. It is rather a myth in the deeper sense of that word. The story gives us in mythic form an account of how God, who loves creation, became so exasperated with the wrongdoing of so many humans that He allowed the whole Earth to be submerged in a flood. But the good man Noah, instructed by God, built a ship, called an ark, in which a remnant of humans, animals and plants, was preserved.

This is a story that conveys several very important truths. It brings home to us that God is very displeased with the widespread evil in our world. But it also emphasises the point that God is determined to protect good and faithful people, even in the face of great disaster.

## GOD'S CARE FOR THE EARTH

In recent years Jews and Christians have come to appreciate another important truth which is conveyed very beautifully in the story, namely, God's love and care for all of creation. This is a truth that is particularly important for us at this time.

The story tells us that when the waters of the great flood had receded, God made a Covenant with Noah and his descendants—that is, with the whole human race of that time and with all future generations—and also with all living creatures. This Covenant was a promise by God that never again would the whole world be flooded in a way that would wipe out all life on Earth. And the sign given by God of this solemn divine commitment is the rainbow.

*I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you – the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you – every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.' And God said: 'This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come. I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.'* (Genesis 9:9-15).

By picking on the rainbow as a sign of this Covenant made by God with humanity and all living creatures, God was choosing as a symbol a reality that is strikingly unique and beautiful. And the rainbow is also a truly cosmic symbol, linking as it does the heavens and the Earth.

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Noah's Ark [1846] by Edward Hicks (1780-1849), Philadelphia Museum of Art.

When we contemplate the beauty of the rainbow, we experience a sense of wonder. And its unexpected and seemingly miraculous appearance, and the mystery of its presence, may even give us a hint of the divine. Furthermore, the variety of its wonderful harmonious colours reminds us of the almost infinite and harmonious variety of species on Earth and also of the many differences among humans. Moreover, the sudden and unpredicted appearance of a rainbow gives us a sense of how God can suddenly break through to us, bringing unexpected and unmerited wonder and beauty into our everyday lives.

### ECOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITY

It is only with the relatively recent development of ecological spirituality that the full significance of this covenant with Noah has been recognised. A key point is that the covenant is made, not just between God and humans, but between God and humans and 'every living creature on earth' (v. 10). As though to emphasise this point it is repeated twice more: '*the covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind... the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth*' (vv. 16–17).

The biblical account of this Covenant with Noah provides a strong biblical basis for our relatively recent waking up to the fact that humans are an integral

part of nature. There is no question of God making a commitment to protect humans while allowing most of the rest of creation to be wiped out or despoiled. We can say with assurance that God cares for other creatures alongside humanity. But it is more accurate to say that God's care for us humans is located within the context of God's care for all of creation.

### OUR CARE FOR THE EARTH

The human side of this agreement or covenant is, of course, a commitment by humans to have respect for every aspect of nature—not just for other people but also for all other living creatures and for the Earth itself. We are at last waking up to the fact that we have been unfaithful to the Covenant with Noah; we are despoiling the Earth. But if we repent and mend our ways, we can be assured that we will be given the grace and strength to adopt a way of life that is truly respectful of the Earth and all its creatures. And whenever we look in wonder at a rainbow, we can commit ourselves to caring for the Earth and to undoing at least some of the damage that our mindless wiping out of so many species of animals and plants is bringing about. ■

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