

Trinity College Cambridge
30 October 2011

Telling Tales: Stories from the book of Genesis
Noah

Genesis 6: 11-22 and 1 Peter 3: 18-23

Markus Bockmuehl

Our subject this evening is the quintessential Sunday School story, for untold generations among the very first episodes children encounter in the Bible. It remains one of the most frequently extracted tales in the children's section of bookstores; Amazon.com currently lists 89 different board books and 108 other editions of this story for the under-2s alone...

That makes our task at once easier and more difficult. One of the problems of an overfamiliar story is that we cease to hear what it is about. Understandably, the fascination for little children is very often with the mesmerizingly counterintuitive zoo-keeping aspects of the story. When my daughter was two she was given a plastic Noah's Ark with figures of Mr and Mrs Noah and a large animal menagerie that could be marched in and out of the boat for hours on end. This toy came to be known as the "Tuba-Tuba" – as in the nursery chorus, 'The animals went in two by two'. I am not sure that the figure of Noah had any other associations for my daughter at that time; but I do know that even in antiquity, Jewish readers wondered quite how the cats on board got on with the mice.

Today's adult world is not necessarily any more comprehensive in its appropriation of Noah. More often than not, what survives of the Genesis story in the public sphere are certain isolated elements that have been extracted and turned into iconic symbols servicing wholly unrelated agendas. Think about the rainbow and its application to pacifism or gay pride, or for that matter the olive branch on the logo of the political project known as the United Nations. Or, for a very different point on the cultural spectrum, try googling Mt Ararat and enjoy the fascinations of a website called NoahsArkSearch.com, which catalogues the efforts of a group of people concerned to identify pieces of fossilised wood on various dramatic mountainsides in the borderlands of Turkey, Armenia and Iran.

Contrary to what these specimens of cultural detritus might suggest, the fact is that Noah remains for both the Jewish and Christian traditions a vital figure for understanding humanity's relationship with the created order and with the creator. The story of Noah illustrates a relationship with God that is not particular to one ethnic group or one kind of religious persuasion, but which comprises blessings and obligations shared by all who inherit the earth. In Judaism, Noah is the ancestor of all humanity for the purposes of a universal ethics. In Islam, the Koran hails him as a prophet and man of faith like Abraham who warned humanity to turn to God and avoid impending catastrophe, but who was glibly dismissed by his own people like many of the prophets of old.

Tonight I would like to stick more narrowly to the figure of Noah as he is in fact presented to us in the biblical record. In this case as in so many others, the image of the biblical saint is reminiscent of Caravaggio or Rubens in that it thrives on the presence of plenty of shadows as well as light.

Like virtually all the great biblical heroes of both Testaments, Noah is a surprisingly flawed character who seems at no time to live up to any stained-glass notion of what a saint might be. We are not told that Noah was in any obvious way exceptional when God elected him – whether handsome, likeable or virtuous. Nor do we hear that his experience in the ark somehow made him a better person. We find that after the flood God blesses him richly and gives the rainbow as a visible sign of his promise to sustain the earth; but almost immediately afterwards the blessings of the land turn out to be rather mixed and shameful when Noah overindulges in the fruits of his own vineyard and in consequence ends up cursing one of his own sons along with his descendants.

Even the story of the people and animals entering the ark has a dark and troubling side in that it speaks of course not only of rescue but also of catastrophe. The context is a moral and ecological crisis, in which disaster looms. God's purposes for creation have been thwarted and God is seen here to declare his displeasure and his desire to start over.

What happens in the flood is the sort of divine judgment which the Bible elsewhere describes in terms of God giving people over to the consequences of their own actions. But the link between moral corruption and environmental or social disaster is not unknown to us. Nor is the sense that this correlation between the moral order and the wider ecology of life may be not simply down to the choices of a few individual bad apples, but driven by more systemic issues, and perhaps a nexus of almost demonic influences. The beginning of Genesis 6 speaks here mythologically of the created order's perversion by fallen angelic creatures.

We live with such demons in our moral ecology even today. Industrial capitalism's success at lifting hundreds of millions out of destitution has come at the seemingly inevitable cost of poisoned oceans and melting polar icecaps. Last week's media reports from Bristol left sadly under-examined the extent to which a neighbourly pre-Christmas cup of tea was turned murderous by the demon of internet pornography. And of course we all know how the mad deception of spending what we have not earned is poised at last to drown Europe's prosperity for decades to come: a global flood of unfunded liabilities on both sides of the Atlantic threatens to leave middle-class aspirations a distant fantasy even for our grandchildren.

So Noah enters the ark with his wife, their three sons and their sons' wives. And a large number of animals – two by two indeed, even if the priestly editor of the account adds seven by seven for the ritually clean animals, to take account of the fact that some would be needed for sacrifices. These humans and these animals are rescued from the disaster that engulfs the world. The ensuing flood waters are slow to recede, but a renewed creation is celebrated when finally the ark lands on a mountaintop where both worship and tilling the land resume.

What makes Noah worth reflecting on today? Noah is a figure of irrepressible courage and of vision in a world of cynicism. He is shown living in a dark age, a time where abusive sex and violence have become commonplace, and where society's relationship with God and with each other is profoundly dysfunctional. The narrative feels weighed down with a deep sense of foreboding; it is clearly not a good time and place to be alive, let alone to plan for the future.

As we saw earlier, Noah is not really depicted as in any obvious sense a saint – although verse 9 introduces him as a man of integrity who walks with God. This Sermon on Noah perhaps means simply that he refuses to succumb to cynicism. He lives his life consciously and purposefully. He merely shows willingness to lift his eyes from the routinely mundane to risk doing something courageous and unprecedented. Noah himself of course is not immune from the looming peril. The unstoppable flood of consequences will sweep away his friendships and his livelihood too. But he lifts his eyes from the self-reinforcing daily routines just long enough to catch a different vision, a vision for the world's survival. Life is not easy for Noah, but despite everything he takes time to hear and heed the voice of God.

The preparations look decidedly quirky, not least through the patient construction of what the narrator clearly understands as a rescue vessel of huge dimensions: about 140m long, 23m wide, and 14m high. The text does not tell us what Noah *thinks* he is doing, let alone what his contemporaries make of it while it is going on. We merely hear that God promises to confirm his relationship with Noah no matter what, and that Noah in turn carries on doing what he has been told. He carries on for a long time: by the time the ark is finished, Noah is an old man – 600 years old, according to chapter 7!

One is certainly left with the impression that here is a man of purpose, evidently to the point of eccentricity. It is hard not to envisage in the scene painted for us by the narrator a scenario of neighbours puzzling over someone squandering enormous amounts of time and money in the pursuit of a vision whose success, let alone usefulness, is far from clear.

Well, you know how the story ends. The flood of incalculable consequences does indeed arrive suddenly, and the apocalypse is not averted. But Noah's investment in the hope of a new tomorrow for the world is rewarded as God richly blesses his ecological rescue venture with a fresh start for all on board.

The eye of faith reads this story and this man understandably in the light of later insights. Jesus saw Noah as a warning of the suddenness of the coming judgment (Matthew 24: 37-39). Our New Testament reading from the First Letter of Peter subtly refers to the time which passed in the construction of the ark as "when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah" (1 Peter 3: 20). For the biblical prophets, the announcement of divine judgment is never straightforward fire-and-brimstone but rather contingent on whether humans are prepared to change their ways in the face of catastrophic consequences. God's extension of mercy and patience may often play out to make faith's efforts seem a tragic waste of time. But they are not, and faithful persistence is what in the biblical writer's view makes Noah a patient communicator of truth to his sceptical neighbours (cf. 2 Peter 2: 5).

Finally, and in the same vein, Noah's example also seems to the New Testament a powerful illustration of the fact that "What you can see is not all there is." Noah's experience becomes a cipher for Christian baptism, for the offer of God's rescue from our own particular flood of overwhelming consequences (1 Peter 3: 21). In the letter to the Hebrews, Noah's story illustrates God's reward of faith in the face of events that are coming but "not yet seen" (Hebrews 11: 7). Noah's faith is not in "pie in the sky" but expressed in hope, in expectation, in action relying on a God who stands by his promise. By this courageous patience of faithfulness, Noah becomes an instrument of God's rescue and of God's fresh start for the world. That is the challenge of faith today.