

Sunday 29 April 2007: Fourth Sunday of Easter

Mapping God's pattern

Readings: Genesis 7:1-5, 11-18; 8: 6-18; 9: 8-13; John 10:22-30

Then God said, "I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you.

Jesus said: "What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."

Noah's ark is the source of some of the best Biblical jokes:

What kind of lights were on the Ark? Floodlights

Did all the animals in the ark come in pairs? No, the worms came in apples!

and, bearing in mind that we have to consider the annual accounts in our meeting after this service:

Who is the greatest financier in the Bible?

Noah – he was floating his stock while everyone else was in liquidation!

Noah's ark may be a good source of jokes, a great one for the illustrators of children's bibles, and a touchstone for fundamentalists and Biblical literalists, but it's easy to be dismissive of it as a story for questioning, open-minded people of the 21st century. And if I consider the authenticity of this story with my scientist's hat on, then it's obviously just plainly ridiculous – except that it isn't. It is, like so many of those familiar stories of the early books of the Bible, as profound and insightful as anything the 21st century can produce. And in an odd way, I've found that science actually helps in trying to find meaning in this story.

In a recent Thought for the Day, Bishop Tom Butler mused on the presence of "fractals" in nature. Fractals are repeated patterns found in things like snowflakes, clouds, the leaves of ferns and even cauliflowers. Go down to any level in the structure of a snowflake and you find the same pattern being repeated – a pattern that seems intrinsic to the nature of the object itself. Mathematicians are able to convert such patterns in formulae and models which often turn out to have surprisingly far-reaching applications.

What that tells me, is that when we put aside the need to think of stories such as Noah's ark as historical facts by looking for the geological evidence for a flood, or the remains of a gopher wood boat, buried deep on Mount Ararat, and start to look at them for what they tell us of God, then recognisable patterns emerge.

At the beginning of the book of Genesis, we have the glorious and profoundly moving meditation of creation being breathed into life through the word and the spirit of God, culminating in order emerging from chaos, humanity created in the image of God and a creation that is indeed good.

But things quickly go wrong as the relationship between God and humanity, and humanity and the created order falls into disorder. The flood described in Genesis 7 is in some ways an

undoing of creation. The physical destruction that God brings on his creation echoes the moral destruction that fallen humanity has brought on the created order.

Yet, for all the destruction that the flood brings in the story of Noah's ark, at its heart is a restoration, renewal and reconciliation between the God of faithful covenant love and his faithless and all-too-easily failing people.

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you"

I suppose that for me is one of the Biblical fractals – a repeated pattern that we see throughout the history of Israel, in powerful and colourful stories like Noah's ark; in the urgent prophetic voice that calls the failing, faithless people to return to God. And ultimately in the faithfulness of the life of Jesus Christ and in the restoration and reconciliation of humanity and creation itself that is brought about in his death and resurrection.

I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand

In that repeated pattern of stories, we find a God who is connected in faithful covenant relationship with his people, and, who despite their failings offers the continued hope of restoration and reconciliation and the possibility of transformation. But the repeated pattern is not just in the nature of the stories. What is at the heart of those different narratives is the fractal, the repeated pattern, that is the nature of God himself. The faithfulness of God who calls his people to relationship reveals a God grounded and founded in relationship – the relationships that we try to describe when we talk of God as the Trinity, the three-in-One.

In our Gospel reading, those who question Jesus seem, on the surface at least, to be looking for a pattern, looking for the familiar sign that would signify the chosen one of God in their midst. Two things become apparent in Jesus' response – firstly is the failure of those questioners to see that pattern that is there before their eyes. *"I have told you and you do not believe. The works that I do testify"*.

And secondly that very pattern which Jesus points to is the relationship of love that is at the heart of God – *"The Father and I are one."*

That great mystery of loving relationship that is the Trinity is a fractal that emerges wherever you look – from creation itself to the recreation of the resurrection and through that all that speaks of God through the biblical witness, through the great traditions of prayer and worship and in our contemporary human experience. In all that great diversity of witness, and at whatever level it is known and experienced, the mystery of God in loving relationship is revealed.

Today, here at St Martin's we launch our new mission action plan, MAP2007-10. In a place where so much happens, we took a conscious decision to focus this Mission Action Plan not on the many things we do, but on the relationships in which we participate as a community. In developing this plan, we reflected both on biblical images and our own experience of God's kingdom in this place. We reflected on that mystery of loving relationship and transforming community that we call God the Holy Trinity. And we tried to work out how to put together a Mission Action Plan that might help us to make that pattern visible in our life as a varied and diverse community in this place.

If you look at the plan, you'll see that at its heart is a desire to build a God-centred community of vision and transformation, a grounded community connected with the world around us, and a community that is itself a place of reconciliation. Those, in a sense, are our fractals - the sort of pattern we want to be made visible in all that we do and all that we are. But for all the heartfelt desire it expresses it is, I hope, not just a plan of wishful thinking. For it also attempts to call us to accountability to that vision – it asks to assess honestly just how recognisable that pattern is our community life, and in the story that is told of God and God's people in this place.

It does that knowing that like generations before us that story will too often be a story of a God of faithful covenant love and a faithless and all-too-easily failing people – but recognising too that even in our failures, the enduring pattern that is the mystery of God in loving relationship is apparent and offers to us the possibility of renewal and restoration.

Then God said, " I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you.

What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one.