

NOAH – GENESIS 6-9

These are dark times. The world is full of violence; corruption fills the air. People refuse to live within the God-given boundaries of what is good and acceptable living. Good order is thrown away and violated and people are doing whatever they like; they are overturning the natural order of things and preferring their own way to the ways that God teaches. So many things are happening that ought not to happen, things that are not even mentioned by name, so dark are they; so corrupt are the hearts of the people. Campaign groups attack Christian values; the media portray Christians as intolerant and out-of-date. Faith is hardly to be found and where it is found, most people think it mad! God is irrelevant to most people's way of thinking and any kind of faith-commitment is very much a minority interest. God is not happy! How can we live out our Christian faith in this hard world? On top of that, we face the hard things that everyone faces at times and these make life and faith even tougher. Here's a series of stories that will help us see how to live out Christian faith in that kind of world.

Whose world are we describing? Actually, this is Noah's world! A corrupt, violent world, a world where God's order is thrown away and people do whatever pleases them. How things change... or not! Our world is not very different; the detail is different, but the world is full of violence and corruption and the God-given boundaries of good for the world are being thrown away and even the churches are complicit! This is the beauty of these Bible stories: they show us people of faith living out that faith in the real world; they are not perfect people (read the end of Noah's story to see that!), but they are people who loved, trusted and obeyed God in the real world. How do we live as Christians in our world? How do we live out Christian faith in a world that seems to want to throw away everything we hold dear? How do we live out faith in the world where so many are actively hostile to what we stand for? That's what Noah did!

Noah's story is a story about an ark and animals; it is a story of rain! Then it is a story of the raven and the dove, of the rainbow and of God's promises. What is the key to the story? Noah is a good man, righteous and blameless. The world is anything but... God has a plan; He is heart-broken that the world has turned out this way and so wants to change it. His plan is to start all over again and so there will be a flood to wipe out evil from the world and Noah is the one through whom God will start again. So Noah is to build a boat, an ark, 3 storeys high to take all the animals; they are to survive the flood as well. Noah starts to build his boat, but not beside the sea; he builds it miles inland and people make fun of him; they mock him and what he's doing and even when he explains why he's doing this and they should change their ways before it's too late, they laugh at him. For 40 days and nights it rains; the flood wipes out evil in the world and Noah and his family and the animals are saved and emerge from the ark to begin all over again; their faith is rewarded, vindicated; they are saved.

There are a few short sentences in the story that act as our guide:

Grace found Noah – we live in a world of such contrasts. In our Western world, there has almost never been a more difficult era for the Church and Christian witness. People are losing their jobs for wearing Christian symbols; Christian standards and values are under open attack in the media and in the government. Yet in other parts of the world, people are becoming Christians in droves; the gospel is making huge headway in some parts of Africa, South America and Asia. God has not gone away; people, even in our community, are discovering the grace of God. "*Noah...*" (*Gen 6:8*) but better the other way round – "*grace found Noah*". God is living and active in the world; His grace touches

Noah's life and makes him the man he will become; it is the grace of God that makes Noah the man of faith. He reacts and responds to God's grace. Noah is loved; Noah is 'graced' by God; the Spirit goes to work in Noah's heart and persuades him of the love and favour of God and Noah believes.

Noah walked with God – There is intimacy in this picture. Is this a leisurely stroll at the end of the day? Or a purposeful walk to get home before dark? Or the early morning to collect the paper? Or is it friends out for a walk together, or lovers walking hand in hand? 'Walking' is a parable for life itself and as Noah lived, so God was with him. As Noah lived out his life, so he lived it out knowing God was there with him. There is the wonderful picture in Genesis 3 of God walking in the garden in the evening, talking with Adam and Eve. Two people walking home on the road to Emmaus and Jesus falls in beside them, God walking with them in their frustrations and disappointments. Two people walking together and as they walk, they talk about all the issues of the day: the government, the economy and our savings; or football and rugby and Scotland at the world cup; about family; about anything and everything that's on our minds and we talk about it with our friends and we share our experiences and we have that sense of intimacy. Noah enjoys that kind of intimacy with God. We have lost something of that, haven't we? God is held at arms' length; we have a passing relationship with God if we have one at all; when we talk to God, it is in proper language, to get the words right and it is all so formal; we're not sure we want God to be with us and share our intimate secrets – be too embarrassing!

Before he *did* anything, Noah had this relationship with God, begun by grace and shaped by intimacy. I look out and see a world that is preoccupied with doing, achieving, with activity. Families are running from one activity to the next to keep the children amused, and their days packed with activities. Others are working all hours because the job demands it. Churches have huge long lists of activities and the hidden message – "you need to take part in as many of these as you can to keep the show on the road." The result: we have a generation of Christians frightened of intimacy with God, frightened to stand naked before God, frightened of prayer and the Bible. We are so busy that we lose intimacy; we lose intimacy with other people, we lose intimacy with God. So we don't really know God. It is more important to *be* than to *do*! It is more important to be the right kind of people than to achieve. It is more important to love God than spend every minute in the service of the Church. Grace found Noah; Noah walked with God before anything else; this intimacy shaped Noah, equipped him to obey God; without it, he would have been only half the man.

Noah did everything – Is there someone in your life, when they say jump, you only say "how high"? There is no argument, no discussion, you just jump! Other Bible stories tell us of people who have questions for God – why? Why me? I'm not up to it? There is no record of any of this in Noah: "*Make...*" (6:14) There are detailed instructions of the size of the boat, the material to be used and why Noah is to do it. All that we read is this: "*Noah did...*" (6:22) Three more times, we're told that Noah did as God commanded, ready and willing to serve. Obedience is not quite a bad word today, but it's not top of the list of Christian qualities. We're more likely to argue with God, or dispute the case or have questions to ask about what He wants us to do, why we should do it and how we can avoid it. Yet, Christian standards and values are God-given; Jesus teaches us how to live life well and these are not given as good advice, they are given as commands to keep and obey. Love is not just a nice sentiment; it is a command of Jesus to love God

and love our neighbour and not just when we feel like it. We are to obey these commands.

We know that this is not an easy thing. Christian values and standards are different from the world in general; Jesus wants us to be different and distinctive from the world, but that is a huge challenge and the one thing our world finds really hard today is someone who is different. Children are bullied at school for just being different in some way or another; Christians are persecuted in Muslim countries because they are different. When we stand up for values that are Christian in the UK today, so often we find ourselves being different from the crowd. The crowd may admire our stand, but even that is not guaranteed. Let's not imagine for a moment that the Bible times are any easier. Noah is building a boat miles from the sea; 'why are you doing this Noah?' "Because God commanded me" and people laughed; they thought him mad. There was a cost to his obedience, just as it costs us to be Christian in our culture. What sustained him? The grace of God; his intimacy with God – these made it possible for Noah to obey, to stand firm in his faith. "Noah walked with God" – that was the key to the whole of his life; his obedience was a matter of love for God who had graced Noah!

God remembered Noah – It's raining! (we know what that's like!) We're inside a smelly boat, full of animals and what they do! It has been going on for so long that we're beginning to wonder if it will ever end. Will we ever escape back to normal life? Then there are three words: "*God remembered Noah*" There is no suggestion that God had forgotten Noah! 'Remember' here means more than memory; remembering is about caring for someone, taking notice of their situation and doing something about it. So God takes note and acts for Noah. The rain stops, the flood begins to go down and we read the story of Noah discovering that the world had begun to emerge from the flood. The turning point in the whole story is this little phrase – "*God...*" (8:1) The promise goes on; remembering goes on; because the story finishes with the rainbow in the sky and God makes this huge promise to the world: "*Whenever...*" (9:16) The rainbow becomes the cue for God to remember His covenant promises to the world, to take note of the world and our needs and to meet these needs. God started all over again and the world was made a new place, just as He promised. God honoured Noah's faith and Noah and his family were saved from the ark, just as God promised. God remembered Noah, just as He promised He would.

Do you think that God remembers you? Does He know your name? Does He know your circumstances in life? Does He know how you're feeling this morning, what inspires you, what delights you, what excites you, what bothers you? Does He have time to take notice of you? Is He bothered to remember you and notice your needs and come to help you? So often, while we want to say 'yes' to all of these questions, we have a quiet suspicion that we're not really very sure what the real answer is. We might, at times, even want to say 'no' to some of these questions; or even 'it doesn't seem like it' which carries a sense of disappointment with it. God has made a covenant with us; a promise with bite! It is a covenant to love, to forgive, to be with us always; a covenant sealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Because Jesus died and was raised, the covenant stands forever, and is guaranteed! Whether it seems it or not, God does remember us; He does know us by name; He does take an interest in us; He does come to meet us in our needs; He does love and care for us; He does know and understand us; He does know what inspires us and what bothers us and He remembers us forever, in all circumstances of our lives.

This intimacy with God doesn't happen by accident or chance; we have to cultivate it. There are three things that we need to do: first of all, we need to make ourselves aware that God is with us always, when we're in Church, or washing dishes, driving, looking after the children or the grandchildren, at work; we need to develop that awareness of God's presence. Secondly, we need to pray and not in the superficial "God bless..." kind of way, but really engage with God, wrestle with Him even and spend time in His presence. Thirdly, we need to get to know God, what He is really like and the Bible helps in that. Over time, the sense of intimacy will grow; we walk with God.

Grace found Noah; Noah walked with God. There's an intimacy there, a love, a quality relationship, an intimacy with God that shaped and sustained Noah's whole life. This is the key to his whole life. It meant that when the challenges came, Noah was ready to meet them. There was faith in the promise; Noah believed God, trusted God; he was determined, courageous, strong, and obedient and these qualities all came because Noah walked with God. He was different, faithful, walking with God when the world was corrupt, violent and throwing God away. In our violent, corrupt godless world...; in a world preoccupied with activity and doing and processes...; in a Facebook world where communication is at a distance...; in a world where we live on sound-bites and a shallow understanding of things... - here is an intimacy precious beyond words. "Noah walked with God." Cultivate it, spend time with God, pray, walk with God. We are half the person we can be without it!