

Sermon 2 January 2022

Genesis 9: 8-15 John 1:10-18

Some years ago, I was asked to visit a family in the country on a pastoral matter. I was given very good instructions on how to get there, instructions which I carefully followed. I drove along this country road until I came to this large, white gate, and sure enough, it had the name of the property clearly displayed on it. I drove through the gate and found myself travelling up a long driveway lined with beautiful old oak trees. On either side I could see over the fence sheep, cattle and the occasional horse grazing.

The driveway wound up a long slope and then at the top of the slope I rounded a bend and I was confronted by this very large and quite lovely old home. The word 'colonial' springs to mind. It was a two storey house, built from native timber, with balconies on the upper level. The grounds were quite splendid, a very large lawn with a rose garden in full bloom and flower beds containing a wide variety of flowers. In one corner there was a swimming pool. At the far end of the garden was a persimmon tree, laden with fruit. Around one side of the house I could see a fig tree, covered in figs. I definitely had come at the right time of the year!

The owners of the house came out and gave me a very warm welcome. It felt good to be there.

Why do I share this experience with you right now? What has this got to do with our gospel reading?

John's gospel is quite different to the other gospels. John uses the incidents in Jesus's life to paint a picture of just who Jesus is; he makes a statement about Jesus – that he is the Messiah and that getting to know Jesus opens up for us a whole new way of looking at and experiencing life.

This passage is often used at carol services, which is interesting because John's gospel does not include the nativity story, but rather begins with that wonderful and well-known line, '*In the beginning was the Word.*' So this is not a story about Jesus's birth, but rather a statement about just who he is.

So John's gospel is rather like a journey, the purpose of which is to arrive at a revelation and understanding of who Jesus is. As I made my way into the country, following directions, until this beautiful home was finally revealed to me and I felt good being there, so do we embark on a journey of discovery, following directions, which can come in a variety of ways, until we come to a place, a place that is beautiful and where we feel good. I could spend a whole sermon on looking at just what those directions are, but that is for another day.

The analogy of a journey is relevant right now because we are all embarking on a new journey which actually began yesterday – a whole new year. If on Friday evening you were

shedding tears of sadness rather than joy at the passing of 2021, I suspect you would be in the minority, which brings me to a point I want to make. It goes without saying that we have high hopes for 2022, but I am sure it also goes without saying that even if this year is a significant improvement on last year, there are going to be times when the going will get tough, when we will encounter challenges and obstacles. That's life!

There is actually good news tucked away in this observation. The first good news is that by wrestling with the issues of your world, whether they be of your own making or not, we are shaped and moulded into the interesting people we are.

The other good news is that no matter what is going on in our lives, God is there for us, if we want him to be, and I emphasise if. Sometimes, the situation might seem hopeless and God feels a million miles away, but he is there and invariably he will pop up in the most unexpected way.

There is the story of a sole survivor of a shipwreck, who was washed up on a small, uninhabited island. He prayed feverishly for God to rescue him, and every day he scanned the horizon for help, but none seemed forthcoming.

Exhausted, he eventually managed to build a little hut out of driftwood to protect him from the elements, and to store his few possessions. But one day, after scavenging for food, he arrived back to find his little hut in flames. The smoke was rolling up into the sky. The worst had happened; everything was lost. He was stunned with grief and anger. 'God, how could you do this to me?' he cried.

Early next day, he was awakened by the sound of a ship that was approaching the island. It had come to rescue him. 'How did you know I was here?' asked the weary man of his rescuers. 'We saw your smoke signal,' they replied.

It is easy to get discouraged when things are going badly, but we shouldn't lose heart because God is at work in our lives, even in the midst of pain and suffering. *'And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.'* Matthew 28:20.

The story of Noah and the flood is a story that most of us are reasonably familiar with; it is part of our culture. It is a story of the consequences of our erroneous behaviour, but it is also a story of God's promise that he will in the end always be there for us, no matter what, a promise as signified by the rainbow. All we have to do is reach out to him. All we have to do is go on a journey, follow the directions and we will come to a beautiful place, a place where God lives, a place to which he will give us a very warm welcome.

