



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

The Baptism of the Lord Year B

The New Ark

Readings: Isaiah 55: 1-11, Isaiah 12: 2-6, 1 John 5: 1-9, Mark 1: 7-11

Go into any good toyshop or must have gift shop and, sooner or later, you will come across a favourite bible story. It will not be the Nativity, except at Christmas time if you are lucky. It will certainly not be the Crucifixion or Resurrection of Jesus. It will not be Daniel in the Lions' Den or Moses leading the people through the Red Sea. No. It will be, almost without fail or fear of contradiction, a little man with a beard and a boat full of animals – Noah's Ark.

Its appeal is obvious but the sentimentality surrounding it will have robbed it of the depth of its meaning and be light years from the extraordinary events which it recalls to the collective memory of humankind.

This first became obvious to me when I was rehearsing readers at St. Alban's Cathedral where I worked in the 1980s. A delightful woman – and otherwise superb reader – came to read the story of the Flood. She read it as if it were a nursery tale for the under sevens.

I called her down from the lectern and asked her to imagine the following..... that a nuclear bomb had gone off in St. Albans and she and I and half a dozen survivors had to remain for six weeks in the stocked bunker which we had prepared and had kept us alive. Could she now go back to the lectern and read the flood narrative in the light of that parallel. 'I had never thought of it like that', she said. Most people don't.

Her subsequent reading was transformed and absolutely riveting. The story of the flood is a definitive moment in the history of mankind. It is the tale of a massive and widespread catastrophe as man was humbled and devastated by the mighty natural power of the planet, over which he had been granted stewardship – stewardship note, not ownership.

But it is deeper than that. In each culture where the flood, the memory of the great inundation, is recorded there is a direct link to divine judgement.

In the Book of the Genesis fallen Man has reached a level of such disgrace, corruption and cruelty that the heart of God is seen to be sorry that He ever created him. The waters will wash away the tide of filth with which humanity has polluted the earth and degraded the image of God.

The Ark, built in faith and at the divine command, becomes the means of salvation. It rides high upon the waters of destruction. It defies the storms. It lands its people and the tokens of creation high on the

mountaintop where the first act of redeemed man is worship and sacrifice. It is upon this cleansing and renewal that the great covenant with Mankind is made by God. The mortal and terrestrial life of Man has been secured.

Roll forward some five thousand years and we stand on the bank of the Jordan. A new Ark is being prepared that will secure the eternal salvation of Man. Out of the tide of human sin and cruelty has emerged, by the grace of God, an immaculate Mother, the God bearer, who will bring, by obedience to the Holy Spirit, the divine life of the immortal into our fragile and passing humanity.

We have seen this acknowledged in the angel inspired worship of the shepherds. We have watched as the wise men knelt before the Christ child with their prophetic gifts. We have heard the witness of Simeon and Anna.

Now, thirty years on we stand listening to the last of the prophets, John the Baptist, declare the arrival of the one true, immortal sacrifice, the Lamb of God who will take away the sins of the world, Jesus Christ, Our Lord. As Christ plunges into the waters, the waters of death that prefigure His Crucifixion, so He rises to lead all in Him into eternal life.

St. Gregory Nazianzen writes: 'Jesus rises from the waters; the world rises with Him. The heavens, like Paradise with its flaming sword, closed by Adam for himself and his descendants, are rent open.' The same sign that greets the end of the judgement of the Flood, the descending dove, appears above the rising Christ and the voice of the Father confirms the

identity of the One who will be the final and determinative act of salvation for Mankind.

There will be a New Covenant in His Blood.

The New Ark will be His Body – filled with the Spirit descending on this day and later on the Church of Pentecost.

That body will be both Sacramental and Ecclesiastical.

It is why we belong to the Universal Church.

It is why we come to Mass.

It is why we bring people to the waters of Baptism – to become part of Christ, the Son of God, the Eternal One, faithful crew on the Ark of Salvation.

Only so can we hope to ride above the waters of death and walked unscathed through the fires of the Final Judgement.

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