**The Sixth Sunday of Easter**

Our reading today is Genesis 8:20 to 9:17

“God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

When I looked at the various readings for today I couldn’t help but be struck by the story of Noah coming out of lockdown. That aspect of the story had never struck me before. This strange and difficult time opens our eyes to new understandings.

This is a very confusing time. There are no right decisions, the information is still incomplete. Those who bear the burden of responsibility will almost certainly be proved wrong and we may end up going backwards. We are trying protect lives and livelihoods, and health in every aspect. This isn’t a single issue, there is no one size fits all solution. Coming out of lockdown is a bit less clear cut than it was for Noah. On the other hand maybe the Prime Minister could try chucking doves out of the window at Downing Street – it seems just as good a way to determine future as anything else.

Facing the unknown changes people, it changes us. We are not used to living with that sense of vulnerability and powerlessness. The Genesis narrative contains this brutal account of a time when everything was swept away. If you look at ancient accounts from the Middle East many of them contain references to a mighty deluge, a time when the whole world was destroyed. The world of course was smaller then, whatever collective memory of a catastrophic event that affected a region probably didn’t affect the entire planet. But something happened, and it stuck in the shared memory. People sensed they had changed, the world had become less predictable, life less assured. The rainbow was a sign of hope.

Today rainbows are everywhere, thanking, celebrating, supporting those key workers who keep our communities alive. We need to be reminded that the rainbow wasn’t just wishful thinking. It was the sign of a covenant. We need a new covenant.

That’s not a word we use very often these days, and when we do it’s usually in a restrictive sense, a legal covenant most frequently tells you what you can’t do. The biblical concept of covenant is different. It is still a binding agreement, but it primarily focussed on making relationship sustainable. When God speaks to his people he binds himself to them, he makes commitments to them. Perhaps we can best understand it as the vows people make in marriage, a mutual commitment to love and to cherish, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health.

As a society, maybe this is a time for us to shape a new covenant with those for whom the rainbow is raised. I think we maybe need to rediscover that word ‘covenant’, because it is primarily about right relationship. That is something we have not taken seriously enough in recent times.

You will no doubt have heard this week that we have a new Bishop of Chester, the Rt Revd Mark Tanner, currently Bishop of Berwick in the Diocese of Newcastle. We look forward to welcoming Bishop Mark and his wife Lindsay to Chester, though in reality they are returning to a place they already know very well, Bishop Mark was ordained within this Diocese and served a curacy at St Mary’s, Upton. He comes at an extraordinary time and faces great challenges. Pray that God will grant him wisdom, resilience and holiness in his new ministry.

In other news – our PCCs are working hard to be ready for when churches can reopen. It is almost certain that when this happens it will be phased and many of our usual members will still remain in isolation. Singing probably won’t be allowed for health reasons. We may be short on sidespeople, church officers, musicians and worship leaders. For a variety of reasons we are preparing an interim pattern of worship which will be simpler, more flexible and allow us to reopen with fewer people. It is a work in progress and we will announce details nearer the time when we can open our churches. In the meantime please be assured we working behind the scenes to make good preparations.