

## THE SIGN OF THE RAINBOW

Lent I

Sunday February 22<sup>nd</sup> 2015

St. Michael, Cornhill

© The Rt Revd Dr Stephen Platten

Just at the moment I am reading the diaries of Harold Macmillan, written during his time as Prime Minister, and just after. I'm only up to January 1959, but even reading that far, both the pressures on the man himself and the troubles of the world were extraordinary: civil war in Cyprus with terrorists attacking British troops; Mao's China shelling the island of Qwemoy and the other islands around Taiwan (then known as Formosa); fears for the future of Hussein's Jordan; constant pressures on a fragile British economy with confrontational labour relations. Remarkably in all of this Macmillan continued to read Jane Austen, much contemporary history, reflections on Aristotle and so much else.

Perhaps the single most terrifying background issue, feeling like an increasingly threatening dark cloud or even a menacingly crescendo like series of drum beats, was the issue of the Cold War and the Bomb. Increasingly large hydrogen bombs were detonated. I think the so-called rainbow bomb touched one hundred megatons – the equivalent of 100 million tons of TNT. It would not be until four years later, in 1963, towards the end of Macmillan's premiership, with Alec Douglas-Home as Foreign Secretary that the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty would be signed by the great powers. It was effectively a *covenant* between the nuclear powers. It required *trust* – even in those Cold War years. That trust was supplemented by inspections and the like.

Encouragingly, the readings which set us off into Lent today also focus on *covenant*. The reading from Genesis sets out the covenant between God and humanity through Noah. Instead

of a 100 megaton nuclear device – a rainbow bomb – we have a rainbow in the sky describing peace, trust and balance for the earth to survive. God speaks thus:

‘I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you . . . this is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you . . . I have set my *rainbow* in the clouds. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant . . . that I have established between me and all . . . that is on the earth.’

The rainbow is a marvellous sign – every time I see one I remember those words. The rainbow is a sign of God’s *enchanting our world with his Spirit*. Now, Anglicanism worldwide has had something of an ambivalent relationship with *covenants* of late. In all the debates on the ordination of women, and on the way in which we respond to gay men and women, the covenant proved not to be the solution it was hoped it would be. Why might that have been? Almost certainly at the heart of it lies that issue of *trust* and sanction. What was produced was not a covenant, but a sort of treaty with conditions: ‘If you don’t do this, then that will happen.’ It was effectively a treaty with threats.

It’s odd that we could have got it so badly wrong. For Judaism and Christianity are both religions rooted in *trust* and *covenant*. Indeed ‘trust in God’ and ‘faith in God’ are overlapping concepts. Trust lies behind the other three covenants between God and Israel in the Old Testament. After Noah, there’s the covenant with *Abraham*. It mirrors much of what we heard just now of God and Noah. It is an everlasting covenant and it is not hedged about with conditions set by God. It simply has God saying: ‘You shall be my people and I shall be your God.’

Rather later on, the covenant appears again this time between God and *Moses*. At the Exodus, Israel is given the land as a sign of God’s covenant with Israel. Finally, later still, once David has become first King in Hebron and then King at Zion – that is in Jerusalem, so there is a covenant between God and *David’s house*. Again God never reneges on the covenant nor sets conditions. It is David who breaks it, by allowing trust to dissolve.

So what does this say to us now? Perhaps most crucial of all, *trust* is in shorter supply in our world than perhaps ever before. Interestingly enough at the moment I am also reading R.H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*. Tawney shows how the fragmentation of the Church at the Reformation led to a shearing of the state from a true religious anchorage. Morals and an ethical code become purely positivistic – that is, we each make up our own, for ourselves as we go along.

Re-capturing that *modus operandi* rooted in covenant which is at the heart of both Judaism and Christianity will offer something to our society well beyond the boundaries of the Church. It can even speak to the depressing lack of trust generated by the banking crisis. But it speaks too to trust in international relations.

Our gospel today, in a remarkable way, re-focuses this for us. Jesus is baptised. Again, our eyes are directed to the sky. This time God's rainbow bursts through, as the clouds are split open from end to end. God establishes a *new* covenant in Jesus. Jesus *trusts* the Father, even to the extent of dying for the future of humanity. That trust emptied out into God's raising of Jesus, which we shall celebrate at the end of this Lenten fast. Of all the rainbows of history, no rainbow beats the rainbow of resurrection – it is a rainbow given and founded by God on trust.

Amen

Readings

Genesis 9. 8-17.

1.Peter. 3. 18-end

Mark. 1. 9-15