

Sermon: A Rainbow Future for all?

(Preached at Waltham Abbey on 5 July 2020 on the first Sunday service after the lockdown)

Based on Genesis 9: 1-7 & St John 8: 12-20

Anybody visiting the Abbey Church at present will not be able to ignore a rather large rainbow flag flying above the chancel and they may be wondering why?

The obvious biblical answer is that the Rainbow is the great symbol of forgiveness and of new beginnings. To Noah it was a sign to him, and his family, that the great flood that had covered the whole earth, and wiped out the entire population, was over and that God had established a new covenant with his people, and promised never to flood the world again. The rainbow was a sign of that covenant and signified a change in the relationship between the creator, (God), and the creation, (humanity).

You will no doubt have noticed that it is upon a Rainbow that Christ sits in majesty in the doom painting in our Lady Chapel and indeed also in the East Window of the Abbey Church. There is also one on our paschal candle as, again, the Rainbow is a symbol of Easter as well. Christ's death brings atonement for all and the rainbow is a sign of the resurrection.

Now of course during the first months of the lockdown rainbows became a symbol of the bravery and sacrifice of those working in the NHS and care workers and rainbows appeared in windows all over the parish as we tried to express our gratitude and appreciation for those who daily put their own lives on standstill and, for that matter, put their own lives at risk for the sake of us all.

So the rainbow has become a sign of sacrifice and gratitude too.

During lockdown we heard of the tragic murder by police officers of George Floyd and the consequential world-wide anger and outcry bringing a much-needed growth in sympathy and understanding for the Black Lives Matter Movement. And, in my humble opinion, about time too!

I was reminded of the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu when apartheid finally came to an end and a new South Africa came into being with Nelson Mandela as its president. Desmond Tutu knew that a new nation needed to be formed in which every person had equal value regardless of their background, ethnicity or the colour of their skin and that, must include white South Africans as well. The subsequent Truth and Reconciliation Commission paved the way to the open and honest dialogue which enabled healing and dialogue to take place.

He coined the phrase "Rainbow Nation", and it's stuck and is nowadays applied in many other situations as an emblem of equality and equity.

The rainbow flag has also long been a symbol of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning + movement. The plus by the way stands for anybody else

who either feels marginalised or excluded by society or just to ordinary heterosexual people who have always been welcome within that community too. The LGBTQ+ community does not want to own the sole rights to the rainbow, what it is saying is that everybody is welcome and equal in the new world of kindness and tolerance which must one day come into being and for which the movement strives.

I remember when many years ago back in the last century I sat in a darkened school physics lab and was able to make a rainbow of my own. By simply directing a beam of light through a glass prism a rainbow was made and it was marvellous to behold.

One of the more obvious things about a rainbow is that the colours have equal priority. It just isn't possible for a rainbow to exist within nature that doesn't have all six colours in place; you'd soon notice if one was missing it just wouldn't look right. And the colours are equal; none is more prevalent or has a thicker or thinner stripe.

Jesus refers to himself in St. John's Gospel as '*The Light of the World*' he is God's pure light, shining into the darkness of the world and redeeming it with God's love.

So, if Christ is the light of the world what might be the prism through which that pure beam is shone? I would like to say that the prism is the Church radiating Christ's love into a needy world.

But, what happens of the light coming out of the prism is distorted so that not all of the colours are represented, or some shine out so dimly that they can't be seen.

Then my sisters and brothers, there must be something very wrong with the prism because the light source, *the Light of Christ* cannot be anything other than perfect and pure.

I think, as we begin to work out what the *new* normal is going to be like we ought to keep the fundamental principles of the rainbow at the forefront of our thinking. The Christian Gospel demands of all of us a commitment to community and to common life, there are no opt out clauses.

When Jesus called the first disciples, they certainly didn't always get along with one another, their backgrounds were incredibly different and they brought with them their own prejudices and misunderstandings. Again, though for them there were no opt out clauses. Jesus compelled them to work together until they did get along.

The Covid Virus has been and remains a terrible thing and few of us have not been aware of the many tragedies and broken lives it has left in its wake. If there is a silver lining to all this suffering it has to be that it has given us all pause to reflect and to question who and what we are under God. We have been presented with an opportunity to build a brave new world and more equal world, let us not let it pass by.

There is a wonderful poem about heaven written by John Donne, poet, author, Anglican divine and former Dean of St. Paul's, which reads as follows:

Bring us, O Lord God, at our last awakening into the house and gate of heaven, to enter into that gate and dwell in that house, where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light; no noise nor silence, but one equal music; no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession; no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity: in the habitations of thy majesty and glory, world without end.

Heaven is not like Orwell's Animal Farm where all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal. In heaven everybody is equal. Can we not try harder to make earth more like heaven? I think we can.

Amen.