

¹³ *I am putting my bow in the clouds. It will be the sign of my covenant with the world.*

When I worked as a police officer in the West Midlands, I once walked in to the control room at Chelmsley Wood Police by Birmingham Airport. I was quite taken aback by the policeman who was on the radio that day. He turned to me and said, "Just seen a lovely rainbow outside, isn't that God's promise never to flood the earth?" I didn't really know what to say as it wasn't normally the easiest place to talk about faith but he seemed quite serious so I think I just nodded; "That's right!"

Now, the truth is, I'm not sure how I react to the story of Noah and the Ark. Should it be taken literally, figuratively, as an extended metaphor? I certainly don't feel comfortable worshipping a God who would flood the whole world and only save 8 people. There is evidence of a widespread flood around the right time, geologically, but I don't really have space to get fully into this debate here.

What I do want to say, though, is that besides the meaning of the rainbow as expressed in Genesis 9, there are 3 other uses of the rainbow as an image of hope for the whole world that I would like to mention.

Firstly, you may remember that Archbishop Desmond Tutu used the phrase 'Rainbow Nation' to describe post-apartheid South Africa, following the first democratic elections in 1994. We know that there is no such thing as white light. All natural light is made up of each of the colours of the spectrum which we rejoice in seeing in the sky when it has been raining and is now sunny. I always catch myself naming them as I look awestruck at the natural and startling phenomenon; red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet. What the archbishop meant, of course, is that true society recognises all of its constituent parts as being equally important and all made in the image and likeness of God; *And the creed and the colour and the name won't matter.*

Secondly, in 1978, the artist Gilbert Baker designed the first rainbow flag to represent the experience and full participation of LGBTQ people in society when the first Pride marches happened. It was still to take several decades until gay, bisexual and transgender people would enjoy anything resembling full acceptance by society at large in western countries such as The UK and USA. Some European countries have tended to be more liberal and forward-thinking (assuming you agree it is a good thing) and sadly there are still some countries in the world where it is illegal to live a homosexual lifestyle. In some of those places, human beings kill and torture others for expressing what those being persecuted believe is an expression of their God-given identity.

The Methodist Church in Britain is currently discussing a report called *God in Love Unites Us*. What has become clear to me is that many people in our churches believe that people should be able to live however they feel is authentic for them in terms of sexuality. It would seem to be a majority view. But it is not the sole view, particularly when it comes to the understanding of marriage. The Methodist Church is exploring how we can live together with different and strongly held beliefs (convictions). The future will be shaped depending on the extent to which we can choose to live alongside others of a different persuasion. For me, what is always wrong, is treating people as less-than on the basis of such difference.

Homophobia and transphobia; the fear and hatred of people simply on the basis of their sexuality or gender self-identification is always a sin. *And the creed and the colour and the name won't matter.*

Thirdly, during this past year, the rainbow flag has experienced a revitalisation and has come to mean something more. Originally, the rainbow NHS badge was aimed at highlighting the experience of LGBTQ people working in the NHS but then its use widened to become a symbol of unity and harmony for all 'front-line' health-workers and, indeed, those other essential workers carrying on their duties during various lockdowns and other periods of social restrictions. People have decorated stones and pebbles and placed them outside their homes and have stacked them up on sea walls as symbols of peace, harmony and togetherness. Rainbow flags and bunting have adorned many homes. There is even an enormous rainbow painted on the side of the Princess Elizabeth Hospital. I'm sure, like me, you're grateful to those who have kept working in sometimes very difficult and even dangerous conditions. The health-workers rightly take the greatest plaudits but there is an army of people who have kept our society safe and functioning; doctors and nurses, hospital administrators, porters and other ancillary staff, postal workers, sales assistants, those handling freight, refuse collectors, teachers, gas, electricity and water service technicians, mechanics and so on.. *And the creed and the colour and the name won't matter.*

When I needed a neighbour,
Were you there, were you there?
When I needed a neighbour, were you there?

*And the creed and the colour
And the name won't matter,
Were you there?*

I was hungry and thirsty,
Were you there, were you there?
I was hungry and thirsty, were you there?

I was cold, I was naked,
Were you there, were you there?
I was cold, I was naked, were you there?

When I needed a shelter
Were you there, were you there?
When I needed a shelter were you there?

When I needed a healer,
Were you there, were you there?
When I needed a healer, were you there?

Wherever you travel,
I'll be there, I'll be there.
Wherever you travel, I'll be there.