

**“GOD’S PROMISE TO ALL”**  
*Genesis 9:1-17*

Harvest festival time – one of those occasions during the year when we have a special service or celebration to remind us of God’s goodness. We need, them, don’t we? A time to pause and reflect on God’s goodness. I’m sure we’d all say that we remember regularly the faithful provision of food and drink and all the other things which can easily be taken for granted, but it’s helpful nonetheless to emphasise that by celebrating and reflecting with others.

Because, let’s be honest, we all constantly need help to remember all kinds of things, don’t we? Whether it’s a post-it note on the fridge, or a page in a diary, or a bleep on the palm-top computer, or a good old-fashioned knot in the handkerchief we have our little methods of reminding ourselves of tasks to be done or meetings to attend or dates to remember.

The words we’ve just read from *Genesis*, the first book of our Bible, mention such a reminder – the rainbow. It’s there as a reminder of the covenant that God made. What I had never noticed in the passage before (along with a couple of other things we’ll touch on later), was who the reminder was for. The rainbow is a “*sign of the covenant*” for all to see, but the one who will be reminded of the covenant is **God himself**. Now there’s a certain amount of anthropomorphism going on here – human characteristics are being projected back onto God by the writer of these words. But we cannot dismiss these words quite as simplistically as that: there is a far more profound reason why it is God that needs to remember, rather than human beings.

God needs to remember this covenant because it is all dependent on him. This is one of those rare covenants where only one party has any obligations. There are no “ifs” in what God says. He is making an undertaking that he will act in a certain way and there is no condition attached to it for the recipients of his covenant – for you and me. God will never again act in such creation-wide judgement. Never again will he destroy the entire earth with a flood. Never again will he act in anger and cause world-wide devastation. And to remind himself – and to be a sign for us – he will hang his bow in the sky.

This is really the word in Hebrew for a bow – the weapon, the instrument of warfare – which God will now hang in the heavens as a sign of peace and security. He is putting his weapon aside as he works to restore his relationship with his creation through this covenant. But just look at the qualities of this covenant.

**1. BREADTH**

Here’s another thing I’d never really grasped before. This isn’t a covenant made with **righteous** human beings. It’s not a covenant made with **sinful** human beings. It’s a covenant that God is making with **all** creation – every living creature. That point is stressed in vv10,12,15,16,17. God loves his creation. He conceived the idea for it. He designed it. He made it from nothing. He loves it – just like a child loves her yoghurt-pot model or his Lego rocket. That’s why creation is such a riot of colour and sound and smell and taste and texture. That’s why we marvel at a misty autumn sunrise or a sparkling winter frost; why we laugh at the antics of the meerkat and crouch before the mighty whale; why we wonder at the rhythm of the rain and gasp at the roar of thundering surf; why we love sweet fruit and relish the hot tang of spices. It’s because it’s all the work of a creator who is determined that everything he’s made should be the best – and from now on he will do nothing to spoil it.

Of course, that doesn’t seem to stop **us** spoiling it. It doesn’t stop us grabbing all that we can to feed our selfish appetites. It doesn’t stop us gorging ourselves on the bounty of the earth while others starve. It doesn’t stop us plundering the riches of the earth to adorn our homes and bodies and leaving vast tracts of

land and sea denuded and barren. Even as we thank God for what he's given us on occasion like this, we find ourselves determined to continue raping this glorious creation for our own ends. But God reminds us through these words to Noah that we are made in his image (v6b). If that's the case, should we not be treating this world as God does? He loves it – loves all of it, makes his covenant with all of it.

## 2. PERMANENCE

And the covenant he makes is one of permanence. Once more that is emphasised in the words God uses. He says that he will “*never again*” act in this way (vv11,15). He makes it clear that this is a covenant with “*all generations to come*” (v12). It is described as an “*everlasting covenant*” (v16). God is determined that this will last for ever. Which is why only he can make it. Should he have left the responsibility for its continuation with humanity, it would have changed from generation to generation (or, indeed, week to week if it was like government policy on education or the environment). But creation can rest secure in the knowledge that this is a covenant written, signed and sealed by the eternal and unchanging God, the one who is the same yesterday, today and for ever. That's why our festivals and celebrations are so regular. That's why we celebrate harvest festival year after year after year. That's what lies behind the words that God speaks in *Genesis 8:22*.

## 3. GENEROSITY

This is a generous covenant, too, because there are no strings attached. As we've already said, there are no “ifs” in this covenant, no conditions that might mean the covenant becomes invalid. God loves his creation and wants the best for it – and he will do nothing that will prevent his purposes being fulfilled. As far as he is concerned, this is how it will be. Again, we need to note that humanity has done a fair bit to mess it up and to threaten it with destruction through humanly contrived schemes, but God has no such plans himself.

And that means it is not only unconditional, but also undeserved. There's the true generosity. There's no reason, humanly speaking, for God to make this covenant. Humanity has already plumbed the depths of depravity – that's why the flood took place, so we're told in *Genesis 6:5,11,12*. And God, in his omniscience and perfect wisdom, must have known what was likely to happen in the future. But still he pledged himself to this covenant with all living creatures. And he does all he can to ensure that, not only is the earth not destroyed, but that it flourishes and prospers. What a great God!

And, as is so often the case in the story of God's dealing with humanity, there is a mirror of this in the New Testament, the New Covenant. What God has begun in these words here is continued – fulfilled even – through the activity of his Son Jesus. There is **GENEROSITY** in the new covenant. Once again, it is all at the initiative of God himself. “*While we were still sinners*”, undeserving and unable to do anything for ourselves to restore our relationship with God, “*Christ died for us*”, writes Paul in *Romans 5:8*. And in his preaching and his letters he stresses again and again that this covenant that God has made with humanity is all of grace. Look at *Romans 5:17* or at *Ephesians 2:8*. This is all about God's lavish and overwhelming love for us.

And not just for us, but – like his covenant with humanity through Noah – for all generations to come: it is a covenant of **PERMANENCE**. The writer of the *Letter to the Hebrews* stresses it in *Hebrews 13:20*. God has spoken and his word will last for ever. He has given us that guarantee and we have no reason to doubt it. No-one has any reason to doubt it, because it is also a covenant of great **BREADTH**. Once more it is St Paul who drives the point home in *Ephesians 1:10* and *Colossians 1:19,20*. The death of Jesus Christ on the cross, the climactic guarantee of God's promise in all this, is an act that speaks of God's love for his whole creation. There is to be restoration and renewal (as we have seen in our studies

in Mark's gospel) that will bring about God's purposes for a new creation. And those who are prepared to put their trust in God for that will have the joy of participating in it.

And just as God gave Noah and succeeding generations the sign of the rainbow to let them know that he was serious, so we have the sign of the cross as our constant guarantee that God is working out his purposes. The bow in the sky was the redemption of an instrument of violence, a weapon of war turned into a sign of peace and reconciliation. The cross was another instrument of violence – the ultimate symbol of torture – but it has now become the reminder to us of our salvation, the sign of God's covenant of grace.

Today as we celebrate harvest and remind ourselves once again of the potency of the rainbow as a symbol of God's desire for us to be reconciled to him, let us also reflect on the power of the cross and today – and every day – give God thanks for the breadth, permanence and generosity of his grace to us. Thanks be to God for his gift beyond words.