

Next Time by Fire

I was out for a walk in down-town San Francisco when I first saw the guy with the sandwich board. I was curious. Why would a grown man walk around the centre of the city in broad daylight carrying signs held by rope around his shoulders? He was well-dressed. He seemed "normal". Perhaps he was a human advertising gimmick. People wear signs for all sorts of products. When I got closer, I realized he was a Christian. The sign on his chest said, in large red letters, that people should "repent"; the one on his back quoted the words of Jesus, "As the days of Noah were, so also will be day of the coming of the Son of Man be" (Matthew 24:37). What an unusual message. The reference to Noah seemed bizarre. Why Noah?. And just who was this "Son of Man"? What exactly did he mean? In a city like San Francisco, it takes a lot to convince people they are sinners and that they should be concerned about the consequences of "sin". Most people who walked past ignored him or laughed. When I asked him what he was doing he quoted Bible verses to me and told me to get ready for the return of Jesus. "Last time the world was destroyed by water. Next time it will be by fire". Scary.

Jesus and Noah

The passage on the sandwich boards were originally spoken by Jesus. The "Son of Man" was himself and he was referring to conditions that would prevail in the world in the lead-up to his Second Coming. The Bible tells us that Jesus is coming again. (In fact, there are several hundred references to the Second Coming.) It says there will be a day of judgment, a time in accounting, when people who live for themselves instead of God will be called to face the judge. There will be no place to hide. Jesus warned those who asked him about the future that he would come again, and that they should be ready. Some people don't like talking about death, judgment, the end of the world, Heaven and Hell, but Jesus had no qualms about making these topics central planks of his ministry and themes of his message. On this occasion, he described the end of the world as similar to the near-end of the human race during the Great Flood described in Genesis 6. Let's go back to that story and find out what he meant.

The story of Noah is sometimes taken as a parable intended to stress a point of Biblical teaching. However, Jesus spoke of it as "fact". (A number of civilizations have celebrated a Great Flood. I have seen written records relating to the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh in European museums. Something cataclysmic certainly did happen.) The notion of a God who judges sin is confronting. Many people want God to be a kind figure like Father Time or Father Christmas, big enough to protect them, kind enough to give them presents but harmless enough to let them do what they like. The God of the Bible disturbs their equanimity.

What was it about the state of the world that reminded Jesus of the time of Noah? And what has it got to do with us today? Why should we care? We need to look a bit more closely at the story to understand what he was talking about.

The Condition of Man

The Bible tells us that the earth was incredibly corrupt at the time of Noah. The human race was feral; people lived by codes of violence. Evil existed in every heart. Murder was common. Little value was placed on human life. Morality was totally corrupted. The codes by which people lived were the exact opposites of what God had commanded. One version of the Bible says that the human race was “rotten to the core”. People competed in immorality. Adultery, cheating, sexual experimentation and perversion were common. Wife swapping was popular, the sanctity of marriage was considered out of date. It was as though every human heart was a “fountain” of evil thoughts, words and actions. The reason was simple. God made man innocent, but people chose to substitute their own values for his. As a result, the poor were oppressed and the rule of law meant little. Clans fought one another. Economic crime was rife. Infanticide was widely practiced. (Sound familiar?) In the midst of all this, with the human race rushing towards destruction God was pleading with them to change. The Holy Spirit never stops pleading with people. Genesis tells us that He was “striving” with men and women everywhere, trying to convince them to turn around and put God first. All they did in response was laugh. They no longer cared.

In fact, only one man “found grace” in God’s sight. Just imagine, out of the entire human race, there was only one person who wanted to be different. Only one man sought to live an upright, holy life, to put God first, worship him and recognize his authority in his personal life and home. He was the odd one out. No doubt he was ostracized as a non-conformist, a conservative, who refused to go along with the majority opinion and be like all the “cool” people. The Bible calls him a “preacher of righteousness” (2 Peter 2:3). He was perfect in his generation, a man of integrity, who walked in fellowship with God. He didn’t have a Bible, a church, Christian friends, Christian TV, books, tapes, CDs, or any of the benefits we have today. The only thing he had was the voice of the Holy Spirit. Everything else was corrupted by the stench of moral pollution.

This was the context of a warning from God, that a flood would come on the earth and that he should prepare to save himself. Acting out of fear, mixed with the certainty that God would keep his word (Hebrews 11:7) Noah built a boat, 137 metres long by 14 metres wide, weighing around 42,000 tonnes. Year after year he laboured on his project. Remember, it had never previously rained in human history, so there didn’t seem to be any sense in his strange adventure. People must have shaken their heads in disbelief about this crazy man who claimed to have heard a supernatural voice.

Even today, people who live first for God, according to His word, experience ridicule and cynicism. In some countries Christians are persecuted by the authorities and majority groups. In Australia, it is OK for a person to go to church one day a week, as long as they don’t try to live their “religion” in the community and workplace. To Noah, the most important relationship was with God, not with a world that was doomed to perish. The day finally came when Noah and his wife, their three sons, their wives and a menagerie of animals entered the ark and God shut the door. Still nothing happened. They must have seemed the

weirdest family on the block. But seven days later the rains came. The flood was comprehensive and every person apart from Noah and his family drowned. Only eight people were saved. Call it unfair or unjust; it doesn't change the historical reality. God's challenge to Noah's compatriots was "choose life over death". The same challenge has echoed down through the ages. God's warnings are usually met with indifference, hostility, stubbornness, rebellion and disobedience. Obedience brings life. Disobedience (or sin) brings death.

Parallels today

So, what has all this got to do with us? Everything, because man has not fundamentally changed, nor has God. The same things that happened in society during Noah's time continue today. We are more sophisticated, more advanced, through complex science, education and modern discoveries. However, the human heart remains just as deceptive (Jeremiah 17:9). The earth continues to be "filled with violence" (take a look at Fallujah and a hundred other centres of military and rebel activity). Military spending continues to outstrip every other Government program in most countries. In many of the world's cities, it is impossible to walk safely in the streets. By the time the average teenager has grown up in Australia they have seen more than 48,000 deaths on television – he or she has learned how to steal, kill and maim in every conceivable way. The family as an institution continues to come under attack.

Parents abdicate their roles. Just the other day, in a legal first, a girl successfully divorced her parents in a New South Wales Court, following years of abuse, including sexual abuse. Immorality according to the Bible has come to be the norm. An alarming increase in teenage pregnancies is offset by 100,000 abortions every year in Australia alone. Drug abuse is up 3,000% since the 1980s. At the same time, religious expression has fallen away. Secular commentators speak openly of a "Post-Christian era". Much of what is left is powerless and without meaning. Jesus called his generation "evil and adulterous" (Matthew 16:4). I wonder what he would call this one. Where are people like Noah today, "Preachers of righteousness", who fearlessly live for Him, oppose sin but love sinners, seek to draw people away from death to life, filling the spiritual vacuum in our society, turning their friends back to God.

Sin has to be judged

No one can play with sin and disobey His laws with impunity (Galatians 6:7). God loves sinners, he is grieved at the consequences of their rebellion, he pleads and strives with them to come back to him and to change (Genesis 6:3). The end result of sin is death (Romans 6:23). These days we tend to trivialize ideas of accountability, consequences and judgment, but God calls us to repent. In a powerful message to Athens the Apostle Paul told them that God now commands all men everywhere to repent of sin, to turn back to Him, because he has fixed a day in which everyone will be judged by Jesus Christ (Acts 17:30-31). 2 Peter 3:9 tells us that it is not His will that anyone should perish, be lost for eternity, but that doesn't alter the fact that a day of judgment is coming.

Tragically, most people will be caught out, totally surprised when it happens; like the people in Noah's day they will be unaware until it comes.

Never again with water

To cut a long story short, almost the entire human race in Noah's day perished in the flood waters. The beautiful sequel to the story is that God promised it would never happen again (Genesis 9:12-17). There will be local floods, but never again will the whole of humanity be wiped out so decidedly in a catastrophic flood. As a sign of the promise, the Bible tells us God created the rainbow, to remind us that he will keep his word.

Next time by fire

So what was Jesus talking about? If there will never again be a judgment like that in Noah's time, what have we got to worry about? 2 Peter 3:5-12 tells us that, next time, it will be with fire. This old world is tinder dry and is going to go up in flames one day. I don't quite understand what that means, but the description in the Bible is clear. Just as surely as judgment came on mankind during Noah's lifetime, so there will be a final judgment. God is not capricious, mean or vengeful. He loves us, he has always loved us, that's why Jesus came and died for us, but it is possible to reject God's love and have to live with the consequences.

The Choice

We can choose to believe Jesus died for us, that he offers us forgiveness and eternal life. Or we can choose to go the other way. The Bible says that when Noah decided to follow God's way, he did so on the basis of faith. He trusted God and knew he would carry out his word, so he obeyed God's instructions. You and I are also called to trust God. Noah was saved because he was "righteous". That word basically means, "in right standing with God". The Bible says Jesus was made our righteousness, so we are saved not because we are good enough but because Jesus was perfect on our behalf (2 Corinthians 5:21). He is the "door" to the ark (John 10:9); he is the "ark", so that if we take shelter in him we can rise above the flood. He is the only way to be saved (Acts 4:12).

Imagine if Noah debated with God, saying that he disagreed with the plan and method. He would have died along with the rest of the people. We are only safe when we come God's way. Many heard Noah's preaching, but chose to remain on the outside. We have to choose, to remain on the outside, or enter through the door, by trusting Christ and following him. One day the door will be closed and it will be too late. Christians are often called "narrow-minded", but if we know God has given us a warning, we are better off heeding that warning, even if the message is not universally popular.

Jesus will come again. One day the world will come to an end. That message can either be scary or depressing, or else it can cause us to seek the door and find shelter. Only Christ can give us the assurance we will be ready.