

Homily for the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

10 January 2010

By Fr Steele Hartmann OCSO

In the story of The Flood we are told: 'God saw that human wickedness was great on the earth, and that the thoughts in the human heart fashioned nothing but wickedness all day long. God regretted having made humankind on the earth, and his heart grieved' (Gen 6:5-7). This story is about human sinfulness being pandemic on the earth. If we look at violence as a manifestation of sin, then we can see the truth of this: our news is constantly filled with images of wars between nations, of civil wars within nations, of senseless violence on the streets of our communities, of violence within our own homes. Sinfulness/violence abounds in our world. Looking on all this, we can understand the Creator God saying, "I regret having made them," for this was not his hope when he made us.

Our image of God is often that of a wrathful or vengeful God: "I will rid the earth's face of humankind." And so God's anger causes a flood that wipes humankind off the face of the earth. But perhaps another way to understand this story of The Flood is in terms of the story of Creation. There we have God parting the waters, and placing a vault in the heavens to prevent the waters above from joining the waters below. Into this space God says, "Let there be life!" These waters are the waters of chaos, and so sinfulness can be likened to the vault springing a leak and raining down chaos on creation below. In The Flood the rains have become a deluge, so great is sinfulness on the earth,

causing the waters below to well up and threaten to join again the waters above, thus obliterating God's creation. Here God doesn't have to do anything, but leave us to ourselves: "This you did and I said nothing," as the Psalm puts it (Ps 50:21).

The Flood, then, is not an act of a wrathful God, but of God's giving us free reign on the earth. This we can see happening today in Gaza, a place so plagued by an unending cycle of violence from without and from within that surely their only prayer can be that of Psalm 69: "Save me, O God, for the waters have risen to my neck. I am sinking into the deepest swamp, and there is no foothold. I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. ... More numerous than the hairs of my head are those who hate me without cause; many are those who would destroy me." Theirs is not what God does, but what they do to one another; when the waters of their own violent sinfulness becomes a flood, it is this which threatens to wipe them out. When such violence/sinfulness becomes pandemic, the experience is more of God's terrible absence (Ps 69:3), and so there can be no hope. Thus do we come to share the grieving heart of our God.

What most grieves the heart of God is that we, all of us, are all sinners; we all have to beat our breast from time to time (cf. Rom 7:15ff). Psalm 14 tells us what God sees when he looks down upon earth: 'They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is not a good person left. ... they have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is not a good person left, no, not even one.' So, in an image that harkens back to story of The Fall, God laments: "Why did I find no one

when I came? Why did no one answer when I called?" (Isa 50:2). In our sin we can only say in a timid, small voice, "I was afraid because I am naked, so I hid" (Gen 3:10). If ours were a vengeful God, our lot would be desperate, for none would survive.

But ours is a God who so loves us that he sent his only Son (Jn 3:16). The *Song of Songs* has a lovely image of this God coming down to earth to see what was going on: 'Before I knew,' it says, 'my desire had hurled me on the chariots of my people, as their Prince' (Song 6:11-12). Here is our champion, our Prince of Peace come into our chaotically violent and flood-prone world, hurled on by his desire for us: finding none, he had to come himself (Mt 21:37). Here is one who comes into our 'wet' and 'soggy' world whom the waters of chaos seemingly cannot touch (Mk1:12-13; Lk 4:1ff): he walks on the waters and tells towering waves to be still. (Mt 14:25; Mk 4:39). Here is one who answers, "Here I am!" when God calls, and so to whom he can say out of great love, "You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you" (Isa 6:9; Lk 3:22).

Jesus' coming to John for a baptism of repentance is really a parable about this incarnation: God's coming into our sin-filled world — which is as paradoxical as the sinless one repenting. So John says to Jesus, "Do you come to me? It is I who need baptism from you!" Jesus simply replies, "Let it be so for now; it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness" (Mt 3:14-15). Here the story of Incarnation: He became like us in all things but sin. Here our Messiah, the counterpart to Noah in the story of The Flood, the one finding favour with God (Gen 6:8), the one with whom, if we go with him into the ark we sometimes

call the 'Barque of Peter', we can safely move across the waters of chaos till at last they should subside (Gen 7:7ff).

This, of course, does not mean that our boat will not be tossed about to the point of sinking by the storms that rage about us, nor that our experience of our God during such times will not be more like he's gone to sleep (Mk 4:37-38). What it is to say, if we keep faith in him, is that with him we will come to no harm in all that assails our world (Mk 4:35-41). When we are fearful, this God-with-us says to us, "How is it that you are so frightened? How is it that you have so little faith? — Is my hand too short to redeem? Have I not the strength to save? With one threat I can dry up the sea, and turn rivers into desert" (Mk 4:40; Isa 50:2).

"Why did I find no one when I came? Why did no one answer when I called?" Our great silence so grieves the Lord because in his desperate love he has come in search of his Beloved but has not found her: "I will rise and go through the city; in the streets and the squares I will seek the one whom my heart loves ... I sought but did not find; I called but got not answer. My soul failed within me," as the *Song of Songs* might put it (Song 3:2; 5:6). This is not a heart wounded by rejection and so angry, but a heart anxious for its Beloved that it cries out, "Come my love, my lovely one. Come!" (Song 2:10).

Our human story is a really love story between a smitten and besotted God and a somewhat fickle lover (e.g. Isa 54:6-10). This God cries out, "I do not desire the death of the sinner, but that he turn back to me and live" (Ezek 33:11). And having found the Beloved says in all

tenderness — though using different imagery, but imagery which brings us back to our feast today: “You are my Son; today I have become your Father. Ask and I will give you the nations for your heritage, the ends of the earth for your domain” (Ps 2:7-8).

It is important that there be at least one good person left whom God is seeking, for, out of his great love, God will not, indeed cannot, refuse such a person anything (Jn 11:41). We need such a person. In the person of Abraham we can see how a good man can bargain with God to avert the destruction with which wickedness threatened Sodom (Gen 18:16ff). The good man Jesus, whom we claim as our own, has prayed for us: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Lk 23:34). We can be sure, then, that his prayer is heard; this we can cling to (see Heb 7:25; 6:13-20). In that story of the destruction of Sodom, we can see also how it was only after the one good man left, Lot, was taken away that the triumph of wickedness could be complete (Gen 19).

Well may we heed the warning: “The upright perish and no one cares. Devout men are taken off, and no one gives it a thought. Yes, on account of evil the upright man is taken off to enter peace” (Isa 57:1-2). For it is only when there is no good person left that the storm clouds really do gather and the rains begin to pour. Jesus, the one good man always present with us, ‘yes, even till the end of time’ (Mt 28:20), is the rainbow in these same storm clouds and the reminder to God of the New Covenant he made with his Beloved, which will keep us all from being wiped out in any ensuing chaos that might threaten (Gen 9:12f).

The prayer of this good man is always heard. This good man Jesus says us: "Satan, you must know, has got his wish to sift you all like wheat; but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail, and once you have recovered, you in our turn must strengthen your brothers" (Lk 22:31-32). Again we should take heart. Further, this good man Jesus is calling us to be good along with him, that we, too, may pray with him to our God and Father, especially in times of great need, and not lose heart. Of course, it might be that, like Jesus the one good man of peace praying for peace in a chaotic and violent world, we too may come to an untimely end. But it is as Jesus said: "Unless a wheat grain falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest — some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty" (Jn 12:24; Mt 13:8).

In a chaotic world a good person's life will never be in vain. We need only look at Northern Ireland to see how the seeds of a few good people can blossom into a peace, though fragile and tentative, that is widespread. For the sake of all our people, we must never tire nor lose hope but always seek and strive after peace, that the chaos of sin and violence may not prevail. We must count on Christ's peace and be willing take a risk; this we can do only from prayer (Mk 9:29). To be good people of prayer with him, to this we are called: "Come my love, my lovely one, come!" In so doing we, too, shall hear those wonderful words: "You are my Son/Daughter, my beloved; my favour rests on you."