

Brother Richard

The Rainbow After The Flood

And God said to Noah and to his sons with him:

I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that is with you: the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you, every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you. Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.

And God said:

This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come. I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me

and the earth. Whenever I bring my clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.

And God said to Noah:

This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth. (Genesis 9:8-17)

The rainbow and the flood

Who among us has never admired a rainbow arching in the sky? As children perhaps we even tried to find the spot where it touched the earth.

The rainbow also appears in the Bible. Unfortunately, it belongs to the story of the flood. One day, a small child said to her grandmother: “I love Jesus, but I don’t like his father.” She went on to explain, “Because he was the one who drowned everyone.” She had just read the story of the flood in Sunday School.

The rainbow is of exceptional beauty, but the biblical narrative is rather troubling. God created animals and humans. Then he changed his mind and decided to destroy them. It is not only little girls who are afraid of such a God.

Would it not be better simply to forget the flood and hold onto the image of the rainbow? It is the seal

of God’s promise: “Never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.” Yet the promise does not dispel our unease that once upon a time, God drowned the whole world.

No flood, no rainbow. At least, that is how the Bible presents it. But the account of the flood is only disconcerting if we content ourselves with a superficial reading of the story, in the belief that we already know it. If we put our preconceptions aside, and read it afresh, with care, we discover a fascinating narrative with a number of surprises in store.

Apocalyptic narratives

In the Bible we find historical books, such as the books of Samuel and Kings. Even if they contain a number of legendary passages, their intention is to relate events that happened at a particular moment in time, in a particular place. Other biblical texts – poems, parables, legends – do not have the same objective.

Where does the account of the flood fit into all of this? Within the context of the book of Genesis, it forms part of a continuous narrative. It follows the story of the Creation and leads on to the construction of the tower of Babel. However, a closer look reveals that the first chapters of Genesis are not intent on recounting historical fact. Creation is not an event in world history, because there is no time nor place when God says: “Let there be light!” The creation accounts speak of the world and humanity throughout the ages.

That the flood narrative does not seek to document an historical event is confirmed by similar accounts that circulated in biblical times and which belong firmly to the mythical genre. The most famous is without doubt *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, a Mesopotamian text from the second millennium BC, discovered in the 1870s. It relates the episode of the flood and its similarities with the account in Genesis created a sensation when it was published.

Apocalyptic narratives exist throughout the whole world. Written in various languages and different eras, they nonetheless have certain traits in common, even when there is no possibility of any direct interdependence. They describe floods of water or of fire, as events that have occurred or are yet to come. They express a concern from which mankind can never really free itself: is the earth a secure place to live?

Since the beginning of time, floods or tsunamis have raised the worrying question of whether or not, one day, water will sweep over our planet leaving it uninhabitable. Volcanic eruptions have no doubt provoked similar anguish: what if, one day, fire were to engulf everything? The many stories of global catastrophe give voice to our fear of a disaster which would destroy all life on earth.

Nowadays we have scientific explanations for earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions and floods. We can measure and to some extent predict them. And we know that however destructive they might be, they will not signal the end of the world.

Advances in scientific understanding have liberated us from certain fears, but have also led to the birth of

new concerns. In the past, the end of life on earth was seen as a possibility. We now know that it is inevitable. Moreover, and this is a recent anxiety, humanity is now capable of bringing about its own destruction, and with it, the destruction of all life on earth.

Apocalyptic narratives such as the story of the flood serve as a means of coming to grips with this anxiety. Japanese comics, for example, which depict a tsunami, bring these anxieties into the open rather than allow them to lurk menacingly in our semi-consciousness. In this respect, the biblical account of the flood is no different. It confronts the reader with the alarming possibility of an end to all life on earth and, at the same time, reassures him.

Distinctive features of the biblical account

Though the biblical account of the flood bears similarities to other apocalyptic narratives from all over the world, it has nevertheless some distinctive features.

First, there is the assurance with which it affirms that catastrophe is behind us for good. “Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life.” This certainty is astonishing. Why should what has happened once not occur again? After all, in spite of all that the Bible claims, the common expression “après nous le déluge” (after us, the deluge), raises the ominous spectre of another flood.

Madame de Pompadour, Louis XV’s mistress, is said

to have used these words when inviting the king to console himself in her embrace following a heavy military defeat. “Après nous le deluge” expresses a lack of concern which laughs in the face of oncoming danger. But this insouciance is only superficial, a temporary suspension of anxiety.

According to the Bible, the flood is behind us for good. Since it is not an historical event, it cannot be behind us in a temporal sense. Throughout history there have been catastrophes and no doubt there will be more. By situating the flood in a definitive past, the biblical account clears the path for a happy future. On life’s horizon we see not imminent catastrophe but God’s promise.

Another distinguishing feature of the biblical account of the flood is its strong link with the creation narrative. The flood appears to be the reversal or undoing of creation. The waters and the earth, divided by God at creation, are brought together once again. Dry earth, home to man and beast, disappears.

At the same time, the ark is built as a means to save the creatures. The flood is the starting-point of a renewed creation. Noah is a new Adam. The animals that were named by Adam are now saved by Noah and his ark.

These parallels invite us to read the account of the flood together with that of creation. The flood sheds light on what the Bible means when it speaks of the creation of the world. God’s creation is nothing like the manufacturing of a carefully-designed machine that would function indefinitely. God is not an engineer nor is the universe a watch.

According to the Bible, the world cannot exist by itself; it is not self-sufficient. It is God who “founded it upon the seas” (Psalm 24:2). The same thing goes for human beings. If they are alive, it is thanks to the continual presence of God: “when you send your spirit, they are created” (Psalm 104:30). The flood is another way of emphasising that the existence of dry earth and human beings should not be taken for granted. Life on earth might just as easily not exist.

If the life of all living creatures, both humans and animals, could just as easily not exist, we can argue that it is already a life that has been “spared”. At its very origin, all life is saved from nothingness. It is in this sense that creation can be understood as one of the acts of “deliverance” accomplished by God on earth (Psalm 74:12). Creation is salvation (another possible translation for the word “deliverance”). To be created is to be protected, saved.

The third feature which makes the biblical account stand out is the reason it gives for the catastrophe. In certain accounts, catastrophes seem to occur for no apparent reason. Sometimes they are the result of the whim of a god seeking to alleviate his boredom. Other, more reflective accounts offer more sophisticated explanations. The Mesopotamian narratives indicate that the flood was caused by human behaviour that was displeasing to the gods.

In the Bible, God decides to wash the earth clean with a great flood because the wickedness of men was so great that life had become impossible. The emphasis placed on human responsibility renders the biblical

account more accessible. It appeals to our awareness that human behaviour plays a fundamental role in the preservation or the destruction of the world.

The main protagonist is nonetheless God. It is he who summons the flood, and it is he who brings forth a new world that is, so to speak, freshly washed. In the ancient Jewish and Christian commentaries, the flood is considered an act of salvation. God rid the earth of destructive violence in order to protect life. Tertullian, an influential Christian thinker from third-century North Africa, called the flood “the baptism of the world”¹.

The covenant

The most striking feature of the biblical account is the covenant. Indeed, it is the flood narrative that introduces this fundamental notion in the Bible. It appears for the very first time at the beginning of the account (Genesis 6:18), then seven more times in the brief passage of Genesis 9:8-17.

The Bible is a book of covenants: the covenant with Abraham, with Israel at Mount Sinai, with David and finally the new covenant. The covenant made with Noah and all living creatures is a kind of prototype for all the covenants in the Bible.²

¹ “Baptismum ut ita dixerim mundi” (*De baptismo* VIII, 4).

² This becomes clear if we read the Bible from beginning to end. Historical criticism shows that the notion of covenant was introduced in the biblical texts to describe the link which unites God to his people Israel. From this point of view, the covenant on Mount Sinai is the first.

But what is a covenant? In modern terms, a covenant is a contract between two or more parties who have negotiated and settled a deal. After the flood, though, there is neither negotiation nor is an agreement made. God is the only one to speak. Noah and his family simply listen. They say nothing; they do not even give their consent.

It is for lack of a better word that the Hebrew *berith* is translated by “covenant”. “Arrangement” would be another possible translation, supported by the Greek version of the Bible prepared by the Jewish community of Alexandria in the second century BC (also known as the Septuagint). God arranges the world in a certain fashion, establishing a certain order. The text does not say that God enters into, but that he establishes a covenant.

Then there is the verb “to give”: “This is the sign of the covenant I am making (literally: giving) between me and you and every living creature with you.” God gives either the sign of the covenant or the covenant itself. The expression “to give a covenant” is also found in the New Testament: “God gave the covenant of circumcision” (Acts 7:8).

At the end of the flood, God arranges or reorders the world according to his will. His covenant is a new constitution, so to speak. It concerns “every living creature”, humans and animals. And it is an “everlasting covenant”. Its core is essentially a promise: “Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life.”

The two sides of the covenant with Noah

What are the implications of this promise “that never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth”? In a positive sense, it means that evil will never again have the last word. The pre-flood world had sunk into wickedness and violence. In creating his covenant, God decides that from now on the world will continue to exist whatever the people who live in it may do.

And yet this decision has a serious consequence. By it, God refrains from drastic solutions. He can never again carry out a global cleansing of the world – this is how, as we have seen, the flood has sometimes been understood. God denies himself the possibility of wiping the slate clean.

By extending his promise to “all generations to come”, God ties his hands. No more radical clean starts: God will never again destroy a depraved world in order to replace it with another. From now on, he will endure his creatures.

So what will God do when injustice and violence begin once more to gain the upper hand? For he knows only too well that “every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood” (Genesis 8:21). God is prepared for there once again to be evil and violent behaviour, and nonetheless he commits himself to never again intervene as he did during the flood.

The covenant with Noah gives us an insight into the dramatic depths of the relationship between God and

his creatures. God is free, but also bound to the order he has established. The account of the flood initially shows an omnipotent God who does whatever pleases him. However, with the covenant, this kind of divine omnipotence becomes a thing of the past, not in a temporal sense but in an absolute, theological sense.

Through the covenant, the drama is transposed to God himself. God is ready to suffer the evil which he forbids himself from extinguishing through violence. His situation can perhaps be compared to that of parents who are unable to stop their children from making harmful decisions. They cannot abandon or forget them either. They remain the parents of their children, and so they suffer.

The flood and the prophet Hosea

The notion of the covenant was perhaps introduced into biblical vocabulary by the prophet Hosea who lived in the 8th century BC. In the Book of Hosea, the covenant with God is an arrangement made in Israel’s favour. But it is made “with the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the creatures that move along the ground” (Hosea 2:18), which likens it to the covenant with “the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals” that we saw in Genesis.

Chapter 11 of the Book of Hosea provides us with a key to understanding just what is at stake in the covenant with Noah. God calls Israel his beloved son. Yet in spite of God’s tenderness, Israel turns away, unwill-

ing and unable to repent and come back to God. “But the more they were called, the more they went away from me. My people are determined to turn from me” (Hosea 11:2 and 7).

For a moment, God considers abandoning and forgetting his people Israel. He entertains the thought of sending a flood of fire like that which destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. But he cannot. He is conquered by his own love. “My heart churns within me, my sympathy is stirred. I will not carry out my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim” (Hosea 11:8-9).

In ancient Egypt, government officials were praised for their “anger”, that is to say their determination and zeal when it came to confronting criminals. The expression “fierce anger” indicates God’s uncompromising opposition to every kind of wickedness. According to Hosea, it could become a flood of fire just as in Genesis it led to the flood of water: “I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth” (Genesis 6:13).

And now the prophet announces that God relinquishes his wrath. Or rather, he internalizes it. His blazing anger is transformed into burning compassion. He says: “My heart is turned over within me” (Hosea 11:8), as other translations have put it. This phrase expresses the enormous tension within God, the drama of the covenant. God declares himself ready to endure and to suffer. He cannot do anything else. Why? “For I am God and not a human – the Holy One among you” (Hosea 11:9).

Through the prophet Hosea, God promises to “never again destroy Ephraim”. In his promise to Noah, the same word appears: “Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life”. It is possible that Hosea’s words influenced the account of the flood. If this is the case, the same unconditional promise that, in Hosea, is given to Israel extends, in the Book of Genesis, to all living creatures.

Put an end to evil or endure it?

Unilaterally, God decides no longer to oppose sinners with destructive force. But what happens then to the evil if it is tolerated like this? God is obliged to endure the wicked. The account of the flood thus raises a serious question: will God resign himself to letting the wicked prosper?

Jesus said: “God causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous” (Matthew 5:44-45). He was perhaps alluding to the commitment God makes at the end of the flood: “As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease” (Genesis 8:22).

Jesus reveals God’s immense goodness. But his words are anything but harmless. Does God’s goodness towards all his creatures not represent an injustice towards the righteous? If God allows evil and good alike to flourish, if his goodness is the same for all, there is a strong possibil-

ity that the wicked gain the upper hand and that the good will not have seen the end of their suffering.

God certainly does not want the wicked to remain wicked, he wants to “heal their waywardness” (Hosea 14:4). But seen from the perspective of the victims, there is nonetheless something hurtful in his promise never again to intervene so forcefully. God does not intervene against the violent and the wicked – is this because he can’t? because he won’t?

The before and after of the flood do not signify two eras, but two different orders. Before the covenant, God does not hesitate to intervene. He cleanses the earth with a flood. He destroys wickedness even at the risk of letting everything else perish. In the second order, that of the covenant, God waits, hopes, endures.

A direct line can be traced from the covenant with Noah to the cross of Jesus. That is just how far God’s patience, to which he commits himself after the flood, will stretch. Instead of sending twelve legions of angels to get rid of those who dare to persecute his Son – a possibility that Jesus himself suggests (Matthew 26:53) – God hands over the Righteous One to the powers of the unrighteous. Before the covenant marking the end of the flood, the opposite was true – God saved Noah, the righteous one, while destroying the unrighteous.

Does the covenant with Noah, and then the cross of Jesus, mean that God has come to terms with the idea that man’s evil is so deep-rooted that it cannot be erased? Does he resign himself to enduring the wicked forever?

God’s promise and his patience do not imply that he will sit back and watch evil thrive. At the heart of his deci-

sion to endure men as they are, there is a passionate hope and a hidden energy which are shown by the rainbow.

The rainbow

And so we arrive finally at the rainbow, sign of God’s reserved strength. For the bow that appears in the clouds forms an arch, a bow stretched to its limits. Equally taut is God’s patience, laden with a power that is held in check. The sign of the covenant, the tensed bow, prevents us from confusing patience with weakness.

Is the rainbow a sign of peace? A Bible scholar of the nineteenth century wrote: “Stretched between heaven and earth, it is a bond of peace between both”. More recent commentaries have remarked that the bow is primarily a weapon. Warriors carry bows. God speaks as an archer when he says: “I have set my rainbow in the clouds” (Genesis 9:13).

In several passages of the bible, God appears as a warrior. Here is an example from the Book of Habakkuk: “Were you angry with the rivers, Lord? Was your wrath against the streams? Did you rage against the sea when you rode your horses and your chariots to victory? You uncovered your bow, you called for many arrows. You split the earth with rivers; the mountains saw you and writhed. Torrents of water swept by; the deep roared and lifted its waves on high” (Habakkuk 3:8-10).

In this passage rich in imagery, God is a warrior who mounts his horse and rides his chariot into battle. He carries a bow and shoots arrows. These same images

can be found in other texts and in drawings discovered in the Ancient Near East. Men in biblical times were familiar with gods who fought.

But with whom is God at war? In the text from Habakkuk, he is attacking rivers, the sea, the deep. He is fighting the same powers that he harnessed to summon the flood. Here, he fights them in order to limit their energy. His promise that “never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life” presupposes that he is in control of the tides. The deep may well “lift its waves on high”; it is already defeated.

In the cultural climate in which the Bible was written, the order and beauty of the world were seen as a result of the victory of the gods in their combat against the powers of chaos. The Bible distances itself from these myths. It is careful to emphasise that God creates effortlessly and without struggle, by means of his word alone: “For he spoke and it came to be; he commanded and it stood firm” (Psalm 33:9).

But the Bible never completely rejects the mythical images and their poetic force. It also likes to evoke the combat in which God lays low the forces of chaos in order to establish and order a harmonious world. Psalm 74, for example, says in language similar to that used by Habakkuk: “It was you who split open the sea by your power; you broke the heads of the monster in the waters” (verse 13). The alternation between day and night as well as the regularity of the seasons is due to this victory of God (verses 15-17).

A sign of one or the other

Is the rainbow a weapon or a symbol of peace? The martial origin of the bow is certain. But there are at least two possible ways of understanding this sign of the covenant.

“I have set my rainbow in the clouds.” The vividly coloured rainbow cannot go unnoticed. In this way, the weapon on display reminds us of God’s vigilance. The rainbow supports the promise: “Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life.” God watches over his creation, ready to intervene as soon as the powers of the deep threaten to destroy it.

We might even ask if the bow displayed in the clouds is not a form of deterrence: who would want to attack an archer who owns such a splendid weapon? Of course this is figurative language, that of the mythical combat between God and the monsters of chaos. God is beyond all forms of representation. But God is also beyond concepts.

“I have set my rainbow in the clouds.” This could imply that God, having finished the combat, hangs up his bow, as would an archer on the wall of his home. According to the book of Hosea too, God is said to lay down his weapons. He says: “I will save them – not by bow, sword or battle, or by horses and horsemen” (Hosea 1:7). The contrast with the text from Habakkuk is striking. God saves without resorting to violence.

From this perspective, the bow that has been laid down is the sign that the battle is over. Is it not after the violence of the storm that the rainbow appears? It reveals itself when the dark clouds which produced

bolts of lightning and rolls of thunder give way to a peaceful light. The bow in the clouds is therefore a sign of disarmament.

The rainbow can be seen both as a bow put on display or put away, as deterrent or disarmament. The two interpretations are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The two together, the play between them is what gives the symbol of the rainbow its richness and its force.

The bow laid down seems to express more what is at the heart of the covenant with Noah, God's decision to endure rather than to destroy. In his love, God turns his back on violent solutions, even when that costs him a great deal – he will not even intervene in order to deliver his beloved Son from the atrocious suffering of the cross.

The bow on display distinguishes God's non-violence from cowardice. God's patience is neither weak nor indifferent. Yes, God has laid down his bow, but it remains taut. The rainbow is the taut, quivering patience of God. Its vivid colours radiate the restrained energy of God's passion.

The sign of the rainbow is visible everywhere. This confirms that the covenant with Noah extends to "all living creatures of every kind on the earth". On Mount Sinai, the tablets of the covenant are given only to the people of Israel. The covenant of Sinai is for Israel, the people that agrees to accept the commandments. The covenant made with Noah is open and universal.

A parallel with the covenant of Mount Sinai

As soon as it was made, the covenant of Sinai was broken. At the foot of the mountain on which God spoke to Moses, the covenant people crafted an idol for themselves, the famous golden calf, and started to worship it. As a result, God decided to destroy them, and it was only after Moses' intercession that he relented (Exodus 32).

And so God chose to put up with this "stubborn" people (Exodus 32:9), just as he had decided to put up with humanity, whether good or wicked, when he promised "never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth." Through Noah and his ark, human beings were saved from the waters that were supposed to cleanse the earth. The intercession of Moses saved the people of the covenant from the fire which would have consumed their wickedness.

God had already revealed his name: "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14). Following his decision to remain faithful to his people, at whatever cost, he reveals his heart to Moses. God is "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6). John sums it up: "God is love" (1 John 4:8).

The words compassion, grace and love each affirm in their own way that God is love itself. Only the words "slow to anger" could cast a shadow over the picture. But they too are speaking about love. The Greek Bible, the Septuagint, translates them as "makrôthymos", mean-

ing “forbearing” or “patient” and in this it has been followed by many modern translations.

The advantage of this translation lies in its clarity. But the words “slow to anger” have the advantage of revealing something of the interior life of God, giving us an insight into the battle playing out in God’s heart.

The next verse adds: God “forgives iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clears the guilty” (Exodus 34:7). God does not consider the guilty to be innocent. He opposes evil. But he holds back his anger. God fights within and with himself, his own heart churns within him until it burns. He refuses to take violent action, but seeks every way possible to overcome that which opposes love.

What God revealed in words to Moses on Sinai, the rainbow presents as an image for all humanity to see. God is love, infinite love, just as the colours of the rainbow are infinite. God’s love is powerful; it contains all the energy of his “anger”, of his uncompromising resistance to evil.

Christ sitting on the rainbow

After the account of the flood, the rainbow reappears two or three more times in the Bible. Ezekiel, one of the prophets who was granted a vision of the throne of God, speaks of a rainbow. Seeing the dazzling radiance of God, he says: “Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around

him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord” (Ezekiel 1:28).

John the Seer of the Book of Revelation also sees the throne and the glory of God: “A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne” (Revelation 4:3). And standing at the centre there is “a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain”, Christ crucified and risen (Revelation 5:6).

These visions have been the inspiration for many artists. In the church of Osios David in Thessaloniki, a late 5th-century mosaic shows the Son of God sitting on a rainbow as if it were a throne. The prophets Ezekiel and Habakkuk gaze up at him, seeing him centuries before he comes to earth. Overwhelmed by emotion, Ezekiel raises his hand defensively. For he saw appear high above the throne “a figure like that of a man” (Ezekiel 1:26).

The image of the Son of God sitting on the rainbow throne is revealing. Christ embodies the ultimate meaning of the rainbow. God’s resolution expressed by the rainbow, his choice to put up with people of all future generations and to refrain from sending another flood, implies and announces the coming of Christ. For if God simply endured and tolerated, there would surely be no end to violence and wickedness.

Christ came to bear the sin of the world, in both senses of the word: to endure it and to take it away. “This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). In him there is both the patience of God which “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good”, and the passion of God which “by no means clears the guilty”. In the gospel we learn that Jesus is “gentle and

humble in heart” and that he “brings justice through to victory” (Matthew 11:29 and 12: 20).

The representations of God striking down the powers of the abyss with his bow and arrow express a powerful hope: God watches over the earth, ensuring that evil does not make it inhabitable. The image of Christ sitting on the rainbow expresses an even greater hope: God fights and delivers us from evil by the power of his overflowing love alone.

What is our role?

The rainbow remains out of human reach: we admire it without ever being able to touch it. As such the rainbow represents the love of God which comes from very high and very far: “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him” (Psalm 103:11) and: “The Lord has appeared to us from afar, saying: I have loved you with an everlasting love” (Jeremiah 31:3).

Directing our gaze upon the rainbow, and by extension, God’s love, we can reflect something of it. For we are made in the image of God. The Book of Genesis reminds us that not only Adam and Eve, but also Noah and his family and thus all humans are made in the image of God (Genesis 9:6). The living God did not want humans to construct statues to honour his presence, as is the custom in most other religions. He made living men and women to represent him on earth.

First God committed himself to a unilateral forbear-

ance: “He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45). But Jesus invites us to become living images of God, likening ourselves to him by practising the same taut patience that he shows towards us: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:35). We begin to resemble God when we behave like God.

Violence and wickedness sometimes make us want to shout out: “Enough!” Who has not longed for God to take the side of victims of injustice and intervene more visibly in their favour? The rainbow reminds us of the patience of God as well as of his passionate love. And Jesus calls us to love as God loves: “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). Such love is strong and radiates as brightly as the vivid colours of the rainbow.

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