Then the Lord said to Noah, ‘Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation’

Those were the opening words of our first lesson. The previous chapter had told us that the moral corruption of humankind had so disgusted God, that he resolved to destroy every living thing on earth, except Noah, his household and the representatives of every species of living creatures, which he had commanded Noah to take with him. In the light of our current preoccupations, we could describe this as Noah and his family self-isolating as an enclave of godly living in a sea of moral turpitude. But there the parallel breaks down, as there would have been little chance of social distancing in the cramped confines of the Ark!

But to understand the story’s deeper meaning we must look at it in a wider perspective, and there are two preliminary points that we must register. First, we need to remind ourselves that this story was never intended to be seen as part of a literal account of world history; it is the fruit of a spiritual and poetic imagination reflecting on God’s nature, and on how his love relates to the way the world is. My second point is that I want utterly to repudiate the suggestion that has sometimes been heard recently from fundamentalist preachers, that God has sent the present plague of coronavirus as a punishment for the moral degradation of our own society – and more than a few such preachers have been so bold as to spell that out more specifically as meaning things like changes in the law of various countries to make provision for same sex marriage. Let me reject that in words of one syllable: our God is not that sort of God! Even the biblical story of Noah recognises that theological truth in its concluding section, which tells of God making a covenant with Noah and his descendants: a covenant is a binding promise, and in this story God’s deal with Noah is spelled out in these terms: “…never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” Those repeated words “never again” mean that in the last resort, with God mercy trumps
judgment: a savage retribution such as that represented by the story of the destruction of almost all living beings in a universal flood, is alien to God’s nature.

The sign of that covenant in the biblical story is the rainbow, with God portrayed as declaring, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.” And that is then spelled out even more explicitly, “When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.”

In the last few weeks, of course, the rainbow has found new prominence as a sign of thanksgiving and hope in acknowledgment of the self-sacrificial dedication of health service and care workers in the dark days of the current Coronavirus pandemic.

But to return to the biblical narrative: the rainbow as the sign of God’s eternal promise of mercy and compassion at the climax of the story of Noah’s Ark reminds me vividly of the time which I spent ten years ago as a guest pastor in a large mediaeval church at the centre of the city of Nuremberg in southern Germany. In that church at the point where the nave (where the congregation gathers) meets the Choir (where the altar is) a massive beam stretches across the church high above the church floor. From the centre of this beam, rises a large cross bearing a figure of the crucified Christ. Nothing particularly unusual in that, you might say – mediaeval churches often had a rood screen surmounted by a cross at that position – the word rood is an Anglo-Saxon word for the cross. But what is unusual about this Nuremberg beam, which dates back to the middle ages, is that it is not horizontal, but it is in the form of an arc of a circle, with its highest point in the centre of its span, and from that point the great crucifix soars upwards. And if you look more carefully at this great bow-shaped beam, you will see some mediaeval paint, a bit faded by now, but still clearly in the colours of the rainbow. A rainbow bearing the figure of the crucified Christ – that gives new meaning to the concluding image of the story of Noah’s Ark, the rainbow as the sign of God’s covenant. And, of course, in this major piece of gothic art the rainbow is intended to be understood not just as recalling God’s covenant with Noah, but as proclaiming the ultimate fulfilment of that covenant, that promise, in the New Covenant, the covenant in Christ’s blood, the New Covenant, or New Testament, which we celebrate in every Eucharist, and which is chronicled in those Books of our Bible which we know collectively as the New Testament, the books of the New Covenant.
The ancient prayer with which I want to finish these reflections was incorporated into the Book of Common Prayer in the sixteenth century, at the Reformation, and specifically it is in the order which that book provides for the Visitation of the Sick – and that rather poignantly takes us back full circle to my starting point, our current concern about the human cost of the Coronavirus outbreak. That prayer is often known as the *Salvator Mundi*, and in the version in the Book of Common Prayer Book it runs like this:

O SAVIOUR of the world, who by thy Cross and precious Blood hast redeemed us: Save us, and help us, we humbly beseech thee, O Lord.

*Amen*