

MARKS OF A CHRISTIAN: TAKING NOTICE

Do you remember that television series “The Waltons?” It was about an American family living in the nineteen thirties. They were seen as an ideal family: poor- but- happy, close-knit, living in a quiet rural area, enjoying a fairly untroubled life. They would all say “good-night” to each other- nicely. There was no door-banging and “go to hell” and “will you turn that music down.”

The series was popular and went on a long time but even the cast started to find it tedious in the end. The actress who played “Mother” got so tired of putting her apron on and taking it off again that she pulled out altogether, giving the script-writers something of a headache for how could you have a perfect family without a perfect mother? They had to pretend that “mother” was in a sanatorium for several years and this was not convincing.

There was undeniably a certain smugness about the series: an underlying message that life was really quite straightforward if you behaved nicely, upheld traditional family values and went to church every Sunday. Yes, people did do wrong but it was never anything that could not be settled by a little talk with mother (or a long-distance telephone call if she was in the sanatorium) and turning over a new leaf. Just like that. And no, life was not all good-the Second World War did break out but it was at a safe distance. It did not affect the dear old homestead. “Walton’s Mountain” was rather like Noah’s ark, a place of safety in a chaotic world and when you watched it, part of you really wished that you had a similar safe place for yourself and part of you could not help thinking, “*what a bore. Give me Brixton on a Saturday night any time.*”
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The threat of chaos has always been part of life. In the natural world earthquakes, volcanoes, cyclones, flood and drought have hovered as a threat to life on earth. Well-ordered individual lives have the ever-present danger of being thrown into confusion by sudden sickness, frailty or death.

This chaos in the natural world is mirrored by chaos in ourselves. Children are taught to behave in a civilised manner, to restrain their more violent, selfish tendencies and grow into well-mannered, disciplined adults. But that chaos of anger, jealousy, sexual desire, frustration, violence, greed is always simmering away in the deeper recesses of our being. And for many there comes a sudden eruption, when they frighten themselves as well as others by the violence of their passions. A mild-mannered accountant suddenly gets caught up in a violent brawl in the pub; a quiet, exemplary wife and mother has a brief fling with the local crook; a teenager with an all-star academic record leaves college and takes up terrorism. And people say they cannot understand it. These men and women have good, well-ordered lives. Why are they suddenly pushing the self-destruct button?

The answer is that we are complex creatures. One part of us craves a safe, peaceful, secure life. We want to build an ark like Noah’s- a home, a job, a family, a church- into which we can withdraw from a chaotic world and keep safe. But there is also a part of us that wants to get out of the ark and confront the danger. We want to swim in the flood waters. We can see a power and a terrible beauty in chaos which you do not find in safe places.

We look at awe-inspiring landscapes- high mountains, deep valleys and remember that these came into being through huge earthquakes and vast volcanic eruptions.

justification in blaming God for the natural disasters that have decimated his life and family. But when Job and God have finally finished shouting at each other, Job realises with awe that he has now seen God face to face and, although his searing pain is still with him, he is not bearing it alone.

Moving on to the Gospels, When Jesus tells his little story about the houses built on the rock and the sand, he does not suggest for a moment that floods are sent deliberately by God to destroy human lives. He simply states the truth that bad things happen in every life. The threats posed by chaos are always there. You cannot hide away. What you can do is to build your life on a firm foundation so that you can survive the flood waters and the stormy winds and the crashing thunder. And that firm foundation is the sacrificial love of God who this time shows that he will allow himself to be torn apart by the chaotic hatred and violence in human nature rather than destroy the world. And through that sacrifice, the chaos of hatred will be turned to unconquerable love; the chaos of violence into a passion for justice and peace; the chaos of death into everlasting life. Build your lives on the knowledge of God's saving power and love and you will ride out the storms and the floods without having to withdraw into a closed ark.

So by the time you get to St Paul, writing perhaps thirty years after the ministry of Jesus, you actually get the first hint of Christian ecology. Paul says that the whole creation is groaning in all its disease and destruction, and that it is waiting for the children of God to stand up and show themselves. In other words, the world needs people who will work with God in using their creative powers to save our planet and to make it fair and fruitful. We have come a long way since Noah.

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This then is the mark of the Christian today. The Christian does not hide from the world but takes notice of the world. The Christian does not shelter in safe places but goes out into the storm and overrides it in the name of Christ. The Christian does not concentrate on saving his own life but on saving the world with God and for God. The Christian does not build an ark for God and for the people of God. The Christian finds the true God and the true community of God's people in the deep waters of the flood and in the darkness of the storm, seeing a vast and amazing beauty even in chaos. And so, as the last two lines of an old welsh hymn say:

I'll bear the flood, I'll breast the tide if Thou, Thyself with me abide. Amen.