

Reading: Genesis 9:8-17

The legend is that the unicorn was late for the Ark and so perished in the flood. I have actually seen not one unicorn but two of them. I was a uni student living at College House and walking home through the Ilam Homestead gardens. There in front of me were two unicorns, pure white and trotting around the lawn. I knew they were unicorns because they had cones on their foreheads. Back at the hostel I told my mates, "I have seen unicorns." I have a lot of sympathy for people who see the Ashburton black panther or the Loch Ness monster. Nobody believed me. They thought I had found some mushrooms and smoked them in the gardens. I found out later that I had walked through the middle of a movie set. Peter Jackson's Heavenly Creatures has a dream scene involving unicorns.

All this really is background to one of the best loved stories of all time: Noah and the Ark. The conclusion of the story forms our first reading today. It would be easy to dismiss it as just a kid's story, but the people of God have drawn great reassurance from it. The church is often likened to the Ark. Gathered together in the church we are safe from the storms around about us. In the Church and in the ark the people of God are carried to salvation. Looking up at the ceiling of our restored church you can see why shipbuilders and church builders were often the same people.

Ten years ago, almost to the day, the hall began offering us a place of safety from the earthquakes around about us. Miraculously for such a high work of brick it has faithfully kept us safe and carried many to salvation. Today, before we go over and enjoy all the restored church has to offer, we need to pause for a moment and give thanks. Give thanks for the common life we have had in the hall. I meant to get out all the yearbooks for the last ten years but just didn't have the time. However, I know there have been over 80,000 acts of communion in this place. That's 80,000 moments of grace. There have been

many baptisms, weddings and funerals, many tears and much laughter. Beautiful music, sermons and prayers have all been offered up in this well-beloved place.

This hall, our 'ark', has carried us to a new place and it has become for us a symbol of God's faithfulness.

For the writers of Genesis, the symbol of God's faithfulness was a rainbow. It was a sign in the sky, a sign that God would never again flood the earth, never again destroy all living things in a flood. It was a sign that represented a covenant between Him and all living things. "I have set my rainbow in the clouds." God said.

The Jews feared the flood more than any other natural disasters. Their cosmology had the earth being surrounded by water. It makes sense really if you drill down into the earth water comes up, when the skies open water comes down, and if you go to the end of the land you find what? You find water - so a flood was a sign there was a rupture in the heavens and on the earth.

Ten years ago there was a rupture in our earth. We call it an earthquake. There were deadly earthquakes taking people's lives and property. Turning our world upside down. We were forced out of our beloved church into the sanctuary of this hall.

I want to pay tribute to the resilience of this congregation. Many would have simply folded. Some congregations did. You could have stopped meeting for worship. But you didn't. Rather you took up the challenge of not only restoring the church but improving it. Well done. Coming five years ago I know how hard and how dedicated you have all been. Rather than curling up and dying you have gone from strength to strength, even building a preschool in between times. The difference between the way a hairdresser and a sculptor die is that one curls up and dyes the other makes faces and busts. You did neither. Instead, you choose the harder path. You choose to restore the church not

because it was easy but because you know that this community needs a symbol, a sign that God hasn't finished with us yet. There is hope. Like the rainbow, the church stands as a sign that God is faithful, that whether it's earthquakes or shootings or COVID God is steadfast. God's love endures forever. This generation needs just such a symbol and so does the next generation. The beauty of its soaring arches and the transcendent windows point to a deeper truth that God is present in all of creation and faithful to His promises.

Today as we pause to reflect on the last 10 years in this hall, we give thanks, and as we give thanks something mysterious happens. We discover that we too can be a sign, a symbol of God's faithfulness. Rainbows are great, churches are too but so are we. By being God's grateful people, we can make a difference in the world. The world needs us, it needs the message of hope that we bring: that God is alive, that love is stronger than evil, that life is stronger than death, that hope even in the darkest times can carry us through.

Rita Snowden a Nelson poet wrote: "God's world is conceived in hope, love is born anew in every child, spring follows the leaf strewn way of winter, eternal life is found in what we call death."

As we move let's allow ourselves to be transformed into symbols of hope that we may be Christ to our world.

St Teresa of Avila put it like this:

"Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

Even if unicorns don't really exist.