

RAINBOWS

Someday I'll wish upon a star
Wake up where the clouds are far behind me
Where trouble melts like lemon drops
High above the chimney top that's where you'll find me oh
Somewhere over the rainbow
Blue birds fly
And the dream that you dare to, why, oh why can't I?

Words from the song '*Over the Rainbow*', by E.Y Harburg written for the 1939 movie '*The Wizard of Oz*'

Fourteen-year-old Judy Garland, playing Dorothy in the movie *The Wizard of Oz* sang the first version of this song and, in reality, she never got over the rainbow. She married five husbands one after the other and, in June 1969, aged 47, Judy was found dead in her London home. Apparently nothing suggested suicide, but the *New York Times* pointed out that she did have a history of drug and alcohol abuse. Jack Parr, a close friend told the story on a TV chat show, after her death, about the day he went to pick her up for lunch at her home, and while he was waiting for her a man knocked at her door, to repossess her car. He recalled how Judy, as this embarrassing situation carried on in her lounge, said: "Remember, Jack. Behind every cloud is another cloud!" The audience laughed but that remark was, it turned out to be, a reflection of her life. She was dead soon after.

Last year, in this service I spoke of streams; today, as a follow-up theme on creation, I am focusing on rainbows. What a phenomenon, a rainbow is. Helen and myself always get excited when we see a rainbow. They are simply wonderful and we have beautiful photographs at home of rainbows we have seen in amazing and in very ordinary places. And as we have already seen, they are the subject of many songs and poems.

My heart leaps up when I behold
A Rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So it is now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the man;
And I wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

This is William Wordsworth's poem, '*The Rainbow*'. He knows that nature existed before he was born, is still there and will remain in the future too. Wordsworth implies there is no fun to live in this world without the beauty of nature; and he expresses a wish to be with natural beauty forever, feeling joy, even when old, when he sees the rainbow.

I don't know how many of you are Muppet fans. I am and I can visualise the opening

scene of the first *Muppet Movie* where Kermit is sitting in the swamp, strumming on a banjo and singing the lyrics:

Why are there so many songs about rainbows
And what's on the other side?
Rainbows are visions, but only illusions,
And rainbows have nothing to hide.
So we've been told and some choose to believe it
I know they're wrong, wait and see,
Someday we'll find it, the rainbow connection,
The lovers, the dreamers and me.

Kenneth Ascher and Paul Williams received Oscar nominations for that song called, the '*Rainbow Connections*' and for the film *The Muppet Movie*.

There is no doubt that in many cultures throughout history rainbows have had an awe-inspiring effect and Kermit the Frog wasn't the first one to reflect on rainbows in a hopeful and thoughtful way, in song, and neither was Dorothy following the yellow brick road to the Wizard of Oz. And rainbows are not illusions.

Physically a rainbow is a large band of parallel strips, all merging together at the edges, which display the full spectrum of colours that make up the sun's white light. This display can be seen when the sun's light breaks up as it passes through, the prism-like raindrops during a rain-shower. This arched spectrum of light only appears when both sunshine and water droplets are present and only in the early morning and late afternoon. As the sunlight enters the falling raindrops, it breaks up into its true colours of red, orange, yellow, blue, and violet. The colours are always arranged according to their wavelengths, with red being at one end of the spectrum, and violet at the other. Inside the droplet, the coloured light bounces from side to side, is reflected off of the droplet and then reassembles, according to wavelengths, to form a rainbow.

Ancient Israelites may not have known about refracted and reflected sunlight on water droplets, but they were familiar with rainbows. To them rainbows were not just cool natural phenomena; they were a sign of hope - hope in God's love, his commitment, his promise. Rainbows are mentioned in Ezekiel (1:28) and in Revelation (4:3 and 10:1) but it is in Genesis that, in the midst of Noah's despair, God makes him a promise:

“I am now making my covenant with you and all your descendants, and with all living beings – all birds and all animals – everything that came out of the boat with you. With these words I make my covenant with you: I promise that never again will all living beings be destroyed by a flood: never again will a flood destroy the earth. As a sign of this everlasting covenant which I am making with you and with all living beings I am putting my bow in the clouds. It will be the sign of my covenant which I am making with the world. Whenever I cover the sky with clouds and the rainbow appears, I will remember my promise to you. When the rainbow appears in the clouds I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between me and all living beings on earth”

(Gen 9:9-17 Good News Bible)

The rainbow becomes a symbol for God's restraint as well as His peace and hope, not destruction and despair. In giving this "rainbow promise" to Noah, God wants to realise the positive, creative potential of humanity, giving us an opportunity to succeed in carrying out His work knowing that we will fail time and time and time again. This "God of Rainbows" is a God who wants a relationship with all his creation. This "God of Rainbows" is a God who blesses his creation and promises grace, mercy and peace. This is a 'God of Rainbows' inviting us to respond to his call to partnership.

Our "God of Rainbows" promises never again to allow our fears and suffering to overwhelm us. Even when it rains and the floods start rising the rainbow of God's promise is always on the horizon...God's promise to meet us in the midst of our frustrations and anxieties, pain and suffering; in the midst of our poor efforts to stay on track, in the midst of our loneliness or despair, with love, mercy, grace as well as hope. God promised to secure his side of what he called his covenant and gives us an invitation too. This covenantal invitation is about responsibility, honesty, openness, integrity, trust in each other, a faith in our 'Rainbow' God, and an attention to God's work which will never be effective unless we have a willingness to value other people for who they are and what they can bring to God's covenant.

The rainbow is an ever-constant reminder of hope. God's relationship with us makes our relationships with each other possible and we can never, ever live without hope. When we fall short, God offers us a rainbow of hope. At the end of the Gospel, Jesus invited his disciples to drink of the new covenant, with no reference to denial, betrayal and death that were just around the corner, but speaking of love, forgiveness and partnership built on peace and hope. Christian hope is not as straightforward as "troubles melting like lemon drops away above the chimney tops." Are you familiar with the words from George Matheson's beautiful hymn, *O Lord that will not let me go*? He wrote: 'O joy that seekest me through pain, I cannot close my heart to thee; I trace the rainbow through the rain and feel the promise is not in vain, that morn shall tearless be.'

To Christians God is in everything, even and maybe especially in our pain. We deny ourselves an enriching experience if we do not recognize that, as we walk through the frustrations, anxieties, suffering, despair (through the storm), he is with us. And the rainbow will appear, saying that Jesus is with us; invisible, often unexpected, but bursting through the grey skies with an amazing spectrum of multi-colour, which can never fail to demonstrate his awesome, yet meaningful and personal presence.

Like the rainbow after the storm hope provides us with a focus on the future and on a future with Jesus. And we are in so much of a better position than poor Noah because under our rainbow stands the cross. Next time you see a rainbow see it as a symbol of hope that God brings to our lives. For without hope there is no faith. Without hope life is pointless. Rainbows are temporary. They do not last long, but they keep on appearing, often after the storm. They should remind us of the hope that is Jesus and, whatever situation we may find ourselves in, whatever we may be going through, the wooden cross under the rainbow, together, must be one of the most incredible symbols of all.