

What are the promises we make to ourselves? What are the promises we make to others? This seems to have been a theme of conversation this week as many of us make commitments at the start of Lent. Some have picked up on our 40 bags in 40 days theme and have started throwing things out – though one person did admit to me that they were just going to fill forty bags at once and get it over and done with! I get the desire – not sure it helps in our daily reflection though. Someone else I know participating in *hashtag 40 acts of gratitude* – being consciously thankful or grateful for something each day and tweeting that fact! Again the idea of being consciously grateful sounds fantastic – the idea of tweeting it fills me with dread!

I am starting to sound like an old grump!

Then of course there are those promises we have made to either give up something, or let go of something or for some, to take up something. Some of these things will be the same things we promised last year, some will be the same things we promised on New Years Eve – some will be new hopes we desire to achieve in our journey of faith.

Now you may be thinking that for a person who promotes Lent as a joyful time, my first sermon of Lent is not starting so well – and you are probably right. But what is the point of promises – how do they help us to be the people we are called to be – how do they guide us?

Well of course at their best they inspire us to a goal, and remind us of the values we seek to live out – but at their worst they are hollow words which hold us back and often lead us to a sense of guilt.

Our readings today help us explore the notion of promise and covenant and what it is that might be achieved. God's words to Noah and his sons in Genesis 9:9-10 are reasonably translated: "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you..." But what does this covenant mean. What is it that God is trying to achieve with Noah and the generations that are to follow?

There is a lot in this story, but to unpack its context in a way that we can understand we need to appreciate that this story is written in a period that is both Androcentric and patriarchal¹. If we are to find a meaning in this story for our contemporary context, we might focus in on the covenant between God and all life as a commitment to protect and save the earth – with humans as well as creation having a role to play. Wif Gaffney² who is a Professor of Hebrew Bible suggests that what the rainbow covenant represents is radical inclusivity in the heart of a narrative shaped by gender bias and ethnocentrism. The covenant between God and all flesh

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3567

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3567

is between God and every person for all time, including but not limited to those who can trace their ancestry to Noah and all of their descendants forever.

But why make this promise – what is its purpose? At one level the story is also about the human need for divine reassurance. God’s commitment is never again to use her power to destroy the earth.

But the promise is also a promise on the part of humanity – a covenant is a two way promise – and so we too promise not to destroy the earth.

This story of the ark, the rainbow and the covenant are very confronting for us; because our reality is that we often are present as we watch creation being destroyed and where we do not take responsibility for our part in the covenant. It is challenging – but it does not make the covenant less valid; rather the promise and the retelling of the story of the promise call us back to the people we are called to be. Each time we remember the covenant story, we remember that we are part of caring for creation – and that that can make a difference.

Our Gospel reading in contrast to the story of the rainbow covenant, is 3 reports of longer stories; three records of promises which help us understand who Jesus is, and the promise that his coming was making a new understanding of the universe. A new understanding of how God relates – not as one who makes promises from heaven; but one who lives amongst and within us; and is therefore the promise here. In a sense Mark’s account of these events which are so much shorter than the comparative stories in Matthew and Luke; give us a glimpse of the promise of the Kingdom of God which Jesus has come to fulfil.

In Jesus baptism the *heavens are torn apart* – this apocalyptic vision of heaven itself confirming that this is God’s son. The spirit literally descends into Jesus, and Jesus hears the confirmation that he is God’s son and has a promised destiny to fulfil. While a personal promise with Jesus, its account is also a promise to use that we can trust not only Jesus, but all that Jesus humanity and divinity will mean for us.

We move quickly from this account of Jesus baptism to a brisk account of Jesus temptation in the desert. For those of us who like a good stories, Mark gives us nothing in this version. Just the bare essential which reveals yet another promise of the kingdom of God – and of the type of ministry we might expect from Jesus. The angels support Jesus in his time in the desert as he battles with Satan. I suspect this, this like the story of the Ark is one that is hard for us to fathom. But the message is similar. Jesus stands at the centre of God *breaking in*³ to change the way the world is. To bring a new Kingdom into being – a kingdom of Justice which reflects the message that Jesus will bring of this new vision. While Mark uses apocalyptic images, there is also promise of a new world, and a new hope.

³ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3566

Finally Mark brings us to the start of Jesus ministry – John is handed over; in the same way that Jesus will later be handed over – and Jesus steps up promising a change – the *Kingdom of God is at hand, come near; repent, and believe in the good news*⁴.

If nothing else Mark's brevity refocuses us. It brings our thinking to the reality of what the start of Jesus ministry might mean – the promise that things are going to change!

We have many challenges which individually and corporately we are facing.

We also have many things to be grateful for and to celebrate.

The point of promises, or covenants in our contexts, like that of the stories in Genesis and Mark are to refocus us. To let us consider what is important; to help us figure out who we are.

In his sermon on Ash Wednesday Fr Laurence invited us to think about what was important to us – and I think he is right – this is the point of a covenant – whether it makes sense to others or not – it should make sense to us, and to the journey that we are on.

During the week I was very privileged to have a number of conversations with different people about where they feel God is calling them to go. I was inspired by their commitment to actively listen to what God might be asking of them. The contexts for each person were very different – and yet each expressed their story in terms of making sense of the journey that are on. The places that we encounter God, and feel God is directing us, the promises we feel called to make, and the covenants which involve promises from both us and God.

Lent is a strange time, as we awaken out of winter into spring, as we find hope in the lengthening days, and more blue skies, as we are encouraged by the budding trees and flowers and songs of new birds – in the midst of this awakening we are invited to enter into ourselves, enter into our covenant with God, as we are invited to refocus, and make sense of the journey we are on.

The promises we make during Lent are ones that invite us to find ourselves in our current context; to find what God would have us do now; and to engage in a conversation of discovery.

It is a gift, a time to evaluate our part in the covenant God has made with every living creature, to make sense of our purpose, and to act on it.

And our gift is ready to be opened; whatever method we put into action to achieve it. Amen.

⁴ Mark 9:15