

Are we good at waiting? On Thursday I was trying to update the St Anne's website as I do every week, and for some reason for the broadband wasn't coping and for every action I did, I had to wait several minutes for the computer to catch up before I could do the next thing. It coincided with me having waited for an Electrician for nearly 2 hours... I started to wonder if I really had any patience at all, and what this might mean for a Lenten journey which was less than 24hours old!!

In Lent, and at other times of the year, we often make promises to ourselves and to God about goals which we might set; or behaviours we seek to change. I wonder sometimes if we remember the patience that this takes, and the need to be open and kind to ourselves in this process. Sometimes we need reassurance that we are not failing, or that our goals are realistic; and sometimes we need to wait for a process and action to catch up.

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 patriarchal<sup>1</sup>. 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 Gaffney<sup>2</sup> 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 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 maybe 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

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3567](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3567)

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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*<sup>3</sup> 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.

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*<sup>4</sup>.

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.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3566](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3566)

<sup>4</sup> Mark 9:15

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.

One of the purposes of Lent, is that it gives us a space to think about what is important to us – to refocus our vision – a little like the story of the covenants in our readings today. We need to look at how we live out our faith, to have the courage to name any contradictions, and move forward.

This is going to be a challenge for many of us as we hear the announcement tomorrow for the plan to start opening up the United Kingdom again and plans for releasing some of our lockdown. This is a covenant of types, a promise that we want things to be different. Given all that has occurred in the past twelve months maybe it is a time to also review our promises, the way we live, and whether there are things that on an individual and community level we need to do differently now.

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; but they take patience. We need to wait upon God and recognise that everything will not change in one day.

Lent can be 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.

It is a time embrace changes withing as we with wait on God. Amen.