

Covenant Faith: Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16 & Mark 8: 31-38
Sermon for Sunday 25 February 2024 (Rev Phil Wootton)

‘Covenant’ is one of the great themes of the Bible. Nowadays, when we hear the word at all, it’s probably to do with marriage. When a couple gets married, they make life-long promises to one another before God. The rings the couple exchange are described as ‘a reminder of the vows and covenant’ they have made. In the Bible, God makes a series of covenants with his people, binding him to them and them to him for ever. Most of our Old Testament readings through Lent tell of these different covenants. Last week, it was the covenant with Noah, which was actually with the whole of creation: the promise that God would never again bring such destruction on the earth as he had through the flood. The sign of this covenant is the rainbow, a joy-filled symbol of God’s promise to all the world.

This week, we hear God’s covenant with Abraham – actually, a renewal of what God had already promised – to bless Abraham, to give him land, and to give him descendants through whom the whole world will be blessed. The sign of this covenant is that he gets a new name: instead of Abram, which means ‘esteemed father,’ he becomes Abraham – ‘father of many.’ And his wife is renamed as well: instead of Sarai, she will be Sarah (‘princess’). These are wonderful words, beautiful, full of promise for the future. Who wouldn’t love to hear them?

How does Abraham respond? Our reading cut off the story before we’re told. But Abraham laughed. And it wasn’t the laughter of joy and delight. It was incredulous laughter. It was mocking laughter. It was a ‘don’t be so ridiculous’ form of laughter. Abraham was 100 years old, and Sarah 90. How could they have children together, when they’d had so many decades of heartache? God insists it will be so. Abraham, who is remembered as the great man of faith has a crisis of faith. He could believe when the promises are general and long term. But when they turn to the here and now, and promise something concrete and specific (and yet apparently absurd) that’s a whole other matter. The so-called father of faith was unable to trust. He offered a different solution instead: ‘I’ve already got a son. Ishmael, my son by my wife’s servant Hagar: he could inherit this great promise.’ But no, says God, he is not the child of the promise. You and Sarah will have a son. That’s my covenant: you better believe it!

In chapter 8 of Mark’s Gospel, the disciples also have a crisis of faith. They believed Jesus when he fed the thousands, verbally defeated the Pharisees, healed a blind man, and accepted Peter’s confession of faith, that he is the Christ. But when Jesus says he must be rejected and killed, only after which (after three days) he will rise again, they can’t get their heads round it. It’s not so much a failure of intellect to grasp his words; it’s a failure of faith. They cannot comprehend that God’s victory can come through overwhelming defeat; that life can come after death; that the capacity for new life can only come from God’s promise. Let go of human punditry and trust the covenant promise of God.

Back with Abraham, there’s a question that is very pertinent: why was Isaac chosen as the child of the promise, and Ishmael rejected? It’s an important question that many ask with regards to the Bible: why was Israel ‘God’s chosen people’? Isn’t God for all? How we answer this will affect our understanding of other faiths and traditions today. After all, Abraham is considered a

father figure to the three great monotheistic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam; and Abraham's son Ishmael is regarded as the founder of the Arab peoples.

I've been reading what the late Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has to say about this, and I find it fascinating. In short, he says, Ishmael is neither vilified nor rejected. Ishmael is given a different vocation. The main story in Genesis is how the promise that God made to Abraham is carried forward through Isaac and then Jacob. It challenges them (and challenges the reader) to keep faithful to the impossible dream God has given them. But a close reading of the text also shows a counter-narrative that gives a special position to Ishmael, who, no fewer than four times is told God will bless him. Although he and his mother Hagar are mistreated by Sarah (with Abraham compliant to his wife's demands) God makes a special effort to care for them. When you read the account, your sympathies are definitely with them. We may be awed by the story of Abraham and Isaac, but we identify with Ishmael and Hagar. God has other plans for Ishmael, who also will be the founder of many nations (just not Israel). Interestingly, Isaac and Ishmael come back together ultimately to bury their father. Reconciliation is possible!

So, why does God not use Ishmael to fulfil the main-stream of his promises. Jonathan Sacks says that it is because he is too strong. Ishmael is described as 'a wild donkey of a man.' In the narrative of Genesis, 'God chooses those who cannot naturally do what others take for granted.' They don't easily have children, for example. They don't inherit their own property. Then in Exodus, Moses, the bearer of the divine word, is a man who calls himself 'slow of speech.' So, 'Israel is a people whose achievements are transparently God-given. What for others is natural, for Israel is the result of divine inspiration. Israel must be weak if Israel is to be strong.'

We recognise these themes in the New Testament. Paul, in 2 Corinthians 12: 10 – 'I delight in weakness ... for when I am weak, then I am strong.' Also in Philipians – the words we use as a Statement of Faith – 'Christ, whose very nature is God ... made himself nothing, taking the nature of a servant.' Above all, in today's Gospel reading: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.' Self-denial is not simply giving up chocolate in Lent, it is the attitude of mind that prioritises God's will. The Methodist church has the custom of a Covenant Service at the start of the year, in which all are invited to renew their commitments. The Covenant Prayer includes these words: 'I am no longer mine but yours. Put me to what you will. ... Let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you; exalted for you, or brought low for you; let me be full; let me be empty; let me have all things, let me have nothing...'

That all sounds like hard-going, and it is challenging. But I want to end back with Abraham and Sarah, and one unusual theme that flows through that narrative – the theme of laughter. As far as I'm aware, there's more laughter in these chapters of Genesis than anywhere else in the Bible. As we heard, Abraham laughed when God said he'd have a son when he was 100 years old, and when Sarah hears she would give birth within a year, she laughed with similar incredulity. But that mocking laughter was turned around when Isaac was born: his very name means 'laughter!' What a celebration there must have been. What wonder, joy and delight there is when we trust the promises of God. What wonder, joy and delight there is, that we have been drawn into his covenant of love.