

Living as People of the Promise Hebrews 11:29-12:2

St Thomas' Church Port Macquarie

18 August 2019

"But Dad, you *promised!*"

"Mum, you *promised* we would!"

Does that strike a sensitive chord for any parents present? Or bring back memories of childhood disappointment?

As a father I often did things like promise we'd go to the beach or the park tomorrow. Remembering that when the children were small we lived in England, so tomorrow, when it came, was often 5 degrees and raining. "But Dad, you *promised* we would go!". "Yeah, but I didn't know it would be so cold and rainy".

None of us like to cause disappointment, especially to children, and none of us like being accused of not living up to our promises, even if we can get by on a *technicality* like the weather or the fact that the word *promise* was not actually used in the first place.

In the Letter to the Hebrews we read about the Faith of OT Heroes: some named, others not named. We are told that all lived by faith and by God's promises (Heb 11:29-39).

This theme of promise runs through much of the Old testament and is a key one that inspires and guides us as Christians.

But what is a promise?

Parents and children often talk about promises. In this context sadly promise has developed an economic or transactional role: "If you promise to be good, we'll go to the beach tomorrow" Or "I promise I'll help buy you that new bike if you save up half the money".

Oxford English Dictionary: *A declaration made to another person with respect to the future, stating that one will do, or refrain from, some specified act, or that one will give some specified thing.*

Strangely, in its everyday language, the church (and society too really) tends to pin promises down into legal concepts such as vows, oaths and declarations. In my job, I deal with these all the time:

Vows: *A vow is a voluntary promise, to perform something not otherwise required but which is acceptable to the other person or group.* Marriage vows, ordination vows, religious or life vows are examples.

Oath: *A solemn appeal to God (or something sacred) that a promise is true or a promise binding.*

Declaration: *A public statement of what is true.*

I wonder what your experience of promises, vows, oaths and declarations is? We believe in a God of promise, and we are to be the people of the promise. We each bring to that some history, our own perspective of promises made and not made, promises kept and not kept; of dare I say, vows kept and not kept. Maybe we have the example in our lives of an honourable person, maybe a parent,

who always fulfilled the promises they made to us, and kept faithfully to their other vows. But equally we might have painful memories of unfaithfulness: of promises and vows not kept. That can hurt a lot.

In the Letter to the Hebrews Paul recalls various heroes of the faith: people of the Old Testament who lived by faith and who were inspired by a promise. Moses, Abraham and others ...

Heb 11:39 “ ... all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised ...”

The promise was not fulfilled until the saving work of Christ had been completed.

This is really Paul’s point in using these OT heroes in his letter to the Hebrews.

The purpose/context of the letter was this: it was addressed to new Christians who were struggling to understand that God was doing something new. How were they to reconcile this new way with the ways of the past?

Paul was saying that even though they didn’t live to see the promise fulfilled, we can still learn from them. In Chapter 11:1 through Chapter 12:29, these OT heroes are examples of discipline, obedience and faithfulness.

He promises descendants and a people to Abraham, even though, from Abraham’s perspective, the details were pretty sketchy and the reality that he could see didn’t point in that direction at all.

He promises land and a future to Moses, yet there were incredible and seemingly never ending obstacles.

But that’s why the biblical experience of promise is so powerful. Hearers of the promise need to set the present reality aside and strike out in hope towards the promised new future. Both Abraham and Moses, and the other OT figures named in Hebrews this morning, did not act out of the evidence that they could see around them (Abraham and Sarah were over 90 and they had no children; Moses had a group of belligerent Israelites who wanted to go back to slavery in Egypt because life was easier there). They did not act out of the evidence around them, they struck out in faith towards a new future. They were being people of the promise. They broke away from the present into the future.

People of the promise are not orientated backwards to the origin, nor even upwards to eternity, but outwards and forwards into God’s future. It is in the future that we will see God’s promises fulfilled and it is in the future that we will experience God’s glory in all its fullness.

Rene Magritte’s painting *The Promise* (1950) reminds me that when we look at the world as people of God’s promise, we see beyond or through the ever-threatening present to a future promised by God.



Some points about the promise as we know it from the Old Testament:

- God's promises will never be made null and void. Though a generation may reject God might not live to see the fulfilment of the promise, the promise remains and can be relied on (Lev. 26: 44-45)
- God's promise is everlasting, though participation in its fulfilment is not guaranteed to everyone.
- As disciples of Christ, we are recipients of this promise, although Christ's work is not yet fully complete. We obtain the fulfilment in an anticipatory way until the final consummation of his Kingdom. Hebrews 11:40-12:2 reflects this.
- God's promise is liberating for us as humans yet is not an end in itself. His promise is part of his mission – his movement of love and grace towards the world (Gen 9:16).

What sort of things do we promise in our lives? What do you promise to your children, grandchildren, spouse, friends or colleagues? Are your promises to be trusted? Are you known as a person who is true to the promises you have made? Maybe, as I suggested earlier, the way you approach these things is influenced by your upbringing – your experience of those around you who have honoured their promises, or those who have failed you and hurt you by not living up to them.

Early service

As Christians we make one very important promise. That is our Baptismal promise. I spoke earlier about how in formal situations we often use related terms or concepts such as vows, declarations etc rather than using the language of promise. But importantly when we are baptised we make a promise. A reminder that in being baptised we are joining a covenant people: that becoming a Christian is becoming a person of the promise.

Page 73 of APBA: "In Baptism, the promises of God are visibly signed and sealed for us"

If we were Baptised as infants we Confirmed these promised as being our own at our Confirmation.

How does my behaviour now, as a Christian disciple, honour those around me and honour God's promise?

One of the problems is, and it was a problem for Moses and the Israelites as well, is that people of promise don't always behave and think according to the promise. We become overwhelmed by the reality around us. Because the promise wasn't being immediately fulfilled, the Israelites wanted to go back to slavery in Egypt. Francois de La Rochefoucauld in the 1600s alluded to this when he wrote: "We promise according to our hopes and perform according to our fears".

Ruth Afolabi offers four dangers faced in running the race alluded to in Hebrews 12:1-2. They are things that can prevent us from running the race well. Comparison, insecurities, fear and pain. **Comparing** ourselves to others can be disheartening and even cause us to miss incredible things that God is offering us along the way. There is a freedom in running our own race. By acknowledging our **insecurities** God can use and overcome them, helping us to pursue his promise and direction for us. **Fear** prevents us from looking forward and running our race well. Moses, who felt unequipped for the job, overcame fear and pressed on ahead anyway. To help overcome the **pain** we can look to the end goal – Jesus – and use this pain to push closer to him rather than being thrown off course.

More Direction: Navigating the Unique Calling God has for your life. Ayo & Ruth Afolabi, Intervarsity Press, 2018. See Chapter 9: Running the Race.

We too easily forget that God keeps his word of promise even when circumstances point to the opposite.

I've looked at the Parish Profile – the document put together by you here at St Thomas' after wide consultation when the parish was vacant and looking for a new Rector. It's an exciting vision for what St Thomas' can be. I encourage you to live to this vision as a covenant people of the promise; this is what God was calling St Thomas' to.

In the letter to the Hebrews this morning we heard of the many people of the Old Testament that God used to live into his promise. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses. He didn't use them because they were perfect, which they weren't. He used them because they were willing and would place their trust and future in God's promise. In fact the list is much longer than the one in Hebrews or even in the whole of the Old Testament and it is never quite complete Your name and mine are on the list as well. At our Baptisms we promised to be disciples, to live (imperfect as we may be) according to

the promise. Our life and faith finds its meaning and purpose in trying to live God's promised righteousness and peace here and now in anticipation of their future fulfilment.

Can I finish with the last verses of today's Hebrews reading, which uses Jesus as our guide and inspiration as we try to live by hope (not fear) as people of the promise?

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely,^[a] and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of^[b] the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.
Hebrews 12:1-2 New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised (NRSVA)

Later Services

It's natural to maybe compare ourselves to the OT heroes mentioned in that reading we heard this morning. Are we willing to place our trust and future in God's promises?

After all, God has called you by faith to live by his promise.

But living by the promise is not natural to us.

We often say that faith is countercultural, but it's also counterintuitive. We're used to behaving according to the evidence we see around us:

So doubt is quite natural for us.

Wondering what God is doing is natural.

Envy of the life of someone else is natural: from what we see life must be easier for them, mustn't it?

Worry is natural. Fear is natural. Wanting to give up is natural.

It's normal to be occasionally haunted by the question of whether what you have staked your life on is really true.

But living by faith in God's promise **isn't** natural. It runs counter to the evidence.

That's because it is God's gift [*'For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.'* Ephesians 2:8]

If your way of living is no longer based on what your eyes can see and your mind can understand, but on God's promise and his provision, it is because God has crafted faith in you.

I said before that we might make all sorts of promises, vows, oaths and declarations in our lives.

As Christians we make one very important promise. That is our Baptismal promise.

It's a reminder that in being baptised we are joining a covenant people: that becoming a Christian is becoming a person of the promise.

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How am I, now, living and thinking as a person of the promise?