

Sermon Genesis 15

“Covenant” is not a word that trips of the modern tongue with ease. It was not always that way. When in 1912 Ulster unionists wanted to express their dismay at the prospect of Home Rule for Ireland they did so through the flamboyant signing of a huge petition entitled the “Ulster Covenant”. Those who signed publicly committed themselves to resisting this significant political change. Their use of the term “covenant” looked back to the Scottish Covenanters of the seventeenth century who united with each other in opposition to the imposition of bishops and a prayer book upon the Scottish Church, spilling a great deal of blood in the process. For me, Walter Scott’s greatest novel is not Ivanhoe, Rob Roy or any of the others but “Old Mortality”, a tale of the Scottish Covenanters. Ignore the introduction, skim the first chapter and begin with a murder, a pursuit, and a fight, after which things begin to hot up, including one of the greatest battlefield death scenes of all literature.

Closer to home, both in time and religious subject matter when the Church of England and the Methodist Church tried to move closer together they did so through a document referred to as the Anglican-Methodist Covenant. “Covenant” in the biblical context refers to the relationship between God and the people. Since God is always in relationship with humanity whether we want to acknowledge or not, you

could say that all of life is “covenant”. In practice, however, in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, this is a word employed to describe those special moments when God re-creates the relationship with people, expressed in promises of how things will be and who will do what to make things work out the way they should. When, for example at the conclusion of the flood, God declares “I shall sustain my covenant with you: never again will all living creatures be destroyed by the waters of the flood, never again will there be a flood to lay waste the earth.” (Genesis 9: 11) As we probably all remember the rainbow then functions as a sign of the truth of that covenant promise.

There are a number of biblical covenants. In the Old Testament probably the best known is the one at Sinai where, following the successful exodus from Egypt the Israelites gather at the mountain to receive the law (most memorably the ten commandments) that forms the structure for who they should conduct themselves as a nation. This seems to be their side of the covenant bargain; they shall be God’s people because God has deigned to be their God. Lesser known covenant language includes some of the language used of the conviction that God has established not only King David on the throne but also an entire Davidic dynasty. When we move to the New Testaments God’s decision to send Jesus, seeking an appropriate response from the people is sometimes described as the “new covenant”; hence the words we use at holy communion. Some is implicitly

covenantal – “Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast. (1 Corinthians 5: 7) is a nod in the direction of the Israelites heading for Sinai. Explicitly, we sometimes hear the words, “This cup is the new covenant in the blood of Christ shed for you and for all for the forgiveness of sin. Drink of it all of you, in remembrance of him.”

Today, we enter into this whole area of covenant through the ancient story of a covenant between God and Abram and try to draw some lessons for our own covenant relationship with God. We are reminded that this sort of covenant depends of on God’s grace, flows from God’s generosity that owes us nothing and yet is happy to be good to us. We are reminded that covenant is not always easy from the human perspective because God makes promises but we are still waiting for delivery. We are reminded that covenant both evokes human actions and results in human reward but one does not depend on the other.

Covenant depends of on God’s grace, flows from a generosity that owes us nothing and yet is happy to be good to us. The conversation begins with God: “the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. He said, ‘Do not be afraid.’” (15: 1) Just because God starts a conversation, however, does not mean that human beings will simply accept what God has to say to us, no matter how God chooses to say it – through visions, though

prophets, even through God's only Son. It's just like that for Abraham who had received a promise that he would be made into a great nation. IN the genesis story this had happened back at the beginning of chapter twelve. Now here we are, three chapters and a lot of action later and Abram is not the head of a great nation and there is no immediate prospect of it happening because he and Sarai remain childless, an adopted slave their only heir.

Here in chapter fifteen God makes twofold response to Abram's complaints about this matter. The first is really just to re-state the promise, "you heir will be a child of your own body" and then secondly to take Abram outside to look at the stars. Doesn't seem like a lot at first glance but it is enough for Abram: "Abram put his faith in the Lord, who reckoned it to him as righteousness." (15: 6) It's not that the promise changes but rather that the human being takes the opportunity to look at it in a new way. Abram looks at that stars. In the pre-industrial days, the days before light pollution, he is gazing at thousands of them, visible to the naked eye. What does Abram think? Does he not think the God who made all this is well capable of carrying out his promises. My role is to wait faithfully for the promise to come true.

Of course there are appropriate actions to take as well as simply accepting the reliability of God's promises. In this passage the appropriate actions

are a bit peculiar to twenty-first century western eyes. I don't suppose any of us would mark an agreement by sacrificing a creature, dividing them in two and waiting for the fiery presence of the Lord to pass between them in a sign that the agreement has been made. Perhaps for us the appropriate way of working is to proceed to act in the world on the basis that we are proceeding in the direction of these promises coming true. God is a God of justice? Then God must want a world of justice so let's get out there and support Christian Aid. A yearly pushing of envelopes through letter boxes, including those of people who don't want to know would seem a peculiar ritual from the perspective of Abram's time. Indeed there are years where it seems pretty strange from my own perspective but that has not stopped me from doing so.

No amount of envelope delivery, church attendance, sermon writing and sermon listening, hymn choosing, hymn playing and hymn singing, and all of the other many and various ways of church life bring the promise of God to reality. Only God brings promises to reality. Nor do any of our faithful actions entitle us to reward – after all Abram's faith was reckoned to him as it says in Genesis, not that his faith actually made him righteous. At the same time, however, it does seem true, as the motto of the school attended, 'work brings its own reward'; also translatable, apparently as 'work in itself is a pleasure'. The Christian Aid collection and the other good works, the worshipping and the praying have an effect

upon us and it is a good one. Surveys find a significant correlation between church attendance and good mental health; between church attending and the practice of community volunteering to help others. I don't think it is just a question of only good people going to church. If it was, I've met too many of the exceptions! It seems to be that when we enter into relationship God (because God has invited to do so) we actually discover some tangible benefits.

For Abram tangible benefit came in the form of children and in time a nation. For us tangible benefits come in the here and now, though sometimes in less spectacular forms. In part this is the challenge to us; to keep faith through the times – personal, institutional and national – when promises about a new world; about eternal life, seem far from certain or fulfilled; to remember Abram and a faithful God who spoke a promise yet again and then, in time brought it into being. To remember, Abram, an example of a human being, coming with his doubts, responding with faith and taking practical actions that exemplified his belief.