

Palm Sunday. 2 April 2023. Holy Communion. John 6vs23-40

This morning we will be completing the sermon series on the promises of God in the scriptures, fulfilled in our Lord Jesus Christ. But before that I would like to compare promises made in the world and those made by God.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a promise as an assurance that one will do, or not do something, or will give or procure something. I wonder how often we make promises on the spur of a moment, without thought on how or when we will keep them, and so are easily broken. Sometimes, they are made with all due thought and in complete sincerity. But due to unforeseen pressures ends up broken too. I don't suppose anyone enters matrimony flippantly. The current UK divorce rate is 42%. In those instances the vows "to love, comfort, honour, care, forsake all others and be faithful to their spouses as long as they both shall live" have been broken by one, or other, or both parties. I'm not pointing fingers here my own family tree is complicated to say the least. Sometimes a promise is long in being kept. A neighbour borrows your hedge trimmer and promises to return as soon as he is finished with it. When he eventually keeps his promise, the trimmer is in a rusty mess. The promise may have been kept but seriously devalued. Even our institutions, political and otherwise, are not great at keeping promises. Here is a current £5 note. In the 1950s a fiver was white and about half the size of a man-sized tissue. Both notes contain the same promise, "I promise to pay the bearer on demand the sum of £5. It's an empty promise because the note's buying power has greatly diminished over time. Here's some Mars bar economics. In the 1950s £5 would have purchased 200 Mars bars. Today £5 will only purchase 7. To rub salt into the wounds, the weight per bar over that period has also shrunk by 20% from 62.5g to 51g. Feel short-changed. Sometimes promises are tweaked to suit the prevailing worldview. E.g. The original Brownie promise said, I promise that I will do my best to love my God, to serve the king or queen and my country, to help other people and to keep the Brownie guide law. Today it reads, I promise that I will do my best to be true to myself and develop my beliefs, to serve the king or queen and my community, to help other people and to keep the Brownie guide law. The guide was changed to make the organisation more inclusive. I'm old but how is it more inclusive to exclude God! So, we can be left disappointed or short-changed by the world's promises.

But promises made by God are never flippant, casual, time-limited. They are never broken. They are never reviewed, edited, or changed. His promises are rock solid, unequivocal commitments. The Bible contains over 3000 promises, and all have been fulfilled, are being fulfilled, and will be fulfilled because God himself is faithful. He can be no other. We can have confidence and assurance that what God has pledged will come to pass. 2Cor. 1v20, "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are yes in Christ." Over this sermon series, we have considered 8 promises. Today we complete the series with the monumental promise "I will raise you." But before we consider resurrection, it is necessary to consider death. The psalmist says in Ps.90v10, "The length of our days is 70 years, 80 if we have the strength." Now it would be wrong to take these lifespans literally. But in my case at 72 plus, death is closer in my thoughts than five years ago. Anyway someone once said there are only two certainties in this life, death and taxes. Heb.9v27, "man is destined to die once and after that to face judgement."

There can be few statements in the Bible less open to challenge. In Chuck Swindoll's book "Getting through the tough stuff.", he dedicates a chapter to death. He reckons there are 4 reactions to the subject of death.

1. Denial. We simply don't talk about death. We remove it from all our conversations and thoughts. We pretend it doesn't exist. We purchase life insurance rather than death insurance.

2. We romanticise it. Horse drawn hearses, elaborate flower arrangements, bright clothes. We use euphemisms for death: He has crossed the Jordan. He's pushing up the daisies. Joseph Bailey was an author who knew a lot about death. One new-born died after surgery, his five-year-old died from leukaemia and his 18-year-old was killed in a sledding accident. In his book, "The last thing we talk about" he wrote; "coronary, cancer, stroke, infection, death comes to us in a multitude of ways for every condition in every age. Shall we deny death and try to make it beautiful. We cannot beautify death. We may live with it and accept it but we cannot change its vile nature."

3. Fear. People fear death like few other realities. I remember flying back from Bristol to the City airport in a small turbo prop plane. It was really, stormy. There were sudden drops in altitude and the plane swayed from side to side. You could smell the fear in that plane. Short prayers were offered up. Oh God and two nuns in the seat in front of me were furiously praying through their rosary beads.

4. Some resort to humour in discussing death. Woody Allen. "I'm not afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens." Old chemists never die, they just fail to react. Old bankers never die, they just lose interest. But sometimes the humour is unintentional. A widow was left with the funeral arrangements for her husband - a mean and difficult man. She spoke to the undertaker about a gravestone. I don't want to spend a lot of money. Let's keep it simple and brief. Just engrave the words to my husband in a suitable place on the stone. Okie dokie. But when she visited the cemetery to view to the stone, to her horror she read, "To my husband. In a suitable place." Seriously though, when a loved one dies, death will not be remotely funny, distant, or beautiful. It will be real, painfully real. But it need not be fearful because Jesus holds out the promise of resurrection and eternal life. At Lazarus's graveside, Jesus wept (the shortest verse in the Bible). I have no doubt he was mourning the loss of his close friend. But I also believe he was mourning the reality that death is the greatest affront to his Father's act of creation. For man was created to live in perfect harmony and fellowship with God forever.

The Westminster shorter catechism says, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." God created us with free will but at the first opportunity to exercise it, Adam failed the test and succumbed to temptation. He chose to reject God's kingship and authority over him. He chose to live by his own rules. Sin entered the world, and the consequence of sin is physical and spiritual death. We are dead in our sins. Collectively, we have inherited the penalty of Adam's rebellion. Individually, we deserve death (whether we believe it or not) because we have endorsed Adam's rebellion by adding our own sins to his. But that is not the end of the story. In an act of pure love and undeserved favour, God has rescued the situation and promised us something wonderful in Christ Jesus. Jn.3v16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." No wonder Paul wrote, "thanks be to God for his indescribable gift." If you love Westerns I'm sure you've heard of Tombstone and its cemetery Boothill. There's an epitaph for a man called Les More. His friends didn't particularly mourn his passing, so his epitaph reads, "here lies Les More. No Les, no more." But that's not true for those who die in Christ. They will be more alive than they ever have been. Let's move on from thinking about death to life. In the passage we read, which follows the feeding of the 5000. Jesus is bombarded with questions by the crowd that followed him. He warns them not to hanker after food that spoils – that is worldly delights. He is the bread of life. He is the spiritual sustenance they need and they can only acquire that sustenance through belief in him. V40, "whoever looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day." So, it is for us today. We must appropriate the bread of life, our Lord Jesus

Christ to begin and sustain our spiritual lives, to move from death to life. We appropriate him through belief in him: belief in his teaching, his cross, his passion, his resurrection, his ascension, his salvation. In Jn.6v54 it says, “whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. You can see echoes of the Holy Communion service which we will celebrate later. But Jesus is not teaching the efficacy of the sacrament. But total assimilation of Jesus into our lives: receive him, submit to him, obey him, respond to him on his terms and not our own. It is only by surrendering fully to the Lord Jesus, receiving him as Saviour, confessing past sins, asking him for forgiveness, thanking him for dying on the cross in our place, and asking him to make us the person he created us to be, that we are reborn given new life that transcends physical death and goes on into eternity.

A few weeks ago, Pastor David Hamilton, a former UVF prisoner, was speaking on “Facing death with joy” in Saint Patrick’s Church of Ireland, Ballymacarrett. A few weeks before that service, he had suffered his fifth heart attack in as many months. His wife recognised the symptoms and rushed him to hospital where they carried out angioplasty to remove the blockage in his artery. Speaking to the surgeon afterwards he asked why he hadn’t carried out a full bypass. The surgeon replied that he would have died on the operating table before they could complete the procedure. But you seem very calm about it all. David replied, “I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as my Saviour. I believe in the resurrection. Even if I had died, I didn’t plan to be dead that long. Death cannot destroy the life that Christ gives. Our fleeting life span in these bodies of decay and eventual death are but a twinkling compared to the magnificent and endless delights of heaven. Paul in 1 Cor.2v9 quotes the prophet Isaiah, “no eye has seen, nor ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.”

Adam Ramsey says, “for the Christian no longer is death a terrorist. It’s little more than a butler opening the door for us into newness of life that will never erode. 1 Jn.5v13 says, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. Note it’s not, might have, or hope to have, but know. John knew because he heard, he saw, he touched Jesus. He personally witnessed his teaching, his miracles, the crucifixion, resurrection ascension and Pentecost. Finally, in these turbulent and uncertain times, it would be easy to lapse into hopelessness and become more problem-focused, than promise-focused.

So let me remind you of the promises of God that we have studied over the past few months. Our Lord will save you, provide for you, satisfy you, give you rest, strengthen you, send his Spirit, reward you, prepare a place for you and raise you. Christian hope does not depend on our circumstances, possessions, capabilities, our temperament, our good works. But only on faith, faith in God, a God who has kept his promises, is keeping his promises. and will continue to keep his promises. **His promises never fail. We can live in peaceful contentment, whatever, because God is always in control, and we have the assuredness of our eternal destination. And so we can say with the psalmist Ps4v8, I will lie down and sleep in peace for you alone o Lord, make me dwell in safety.**