

Sunday 29 March at 6.30pm: Fifth Sunday of Lent

Fulfilling the Promise

Readings: Matthew 28. 16-20; Folk Tale *R S Thomas*

A large part of my Christian life up to some years ago was spent somewhat on the fringes of the evangelical and charismatic movement. The followers were both fervent and sincere in their beliefs as well as deeply convinced of the rightness of their position. I say that I was 'on the fringes' rather than a member of the evangelical and charismatic movement. My life was too full of paradoxes and doubts to be able to sign up to all the certainties that seemed to be necessary to being a 'paid up' member.

One of the many tests of faith that people subjected themselves - and others to - was that known in some circles as 'claiming the promise'. In brief - and probably being a little unjust to some people - this meant that you got hold of what you felt God had promised you - or more often what you hoped had been promised - and you 'claimed' it - i.e. you believed it for all you were worth and - if you were faithful, and didn't doubt - then that promise would be fulfilled.

It was a false teaching - almost to the point of being abusive, promoted by pastors, vicars, ministers and Christians who seemed to feel that *they* had a right to identify and define the promise and that *God* had the duty to fulfill it. The belief wrought havoc with the faith of many people who in their sincerity and fervor believed, usually beyond the evidence of their circumstances, and in some situations it did what can only be described as terrible wrong.

Margaret (all names are changed) was diagnosed with serious cancer needing urgent and intrusive treatment although there were no guarantees that it would be successful. It was a shock to find that her husband - with the support of their church - 'claimed' a promise that God - and God alone - would heal her. She struggled on as long as she could but finally had to take to her bed at home - hospital - as a place of unbelief - was out of the question. When you asked the husband how his wife was his early answers were along the lines 'praise God she's fit and well'.

As the illness progressed, even the question was forbidden, asking meant you doubted. I met with Margaret's sister who was heartbroken, she had been banned from visiting because she brought 'unbelief' into the house. Margaret died a painful, sad and comfortless death. Comfortless in particular because the God she had been urged to believe in had seemingly deserted her and the promise had not been fulfilled because of her own - or other people's - lack of faith.

I bumped into Martin one day. Married with two young children he had been out of work for some time. He told me with joy he was about to sign off the unemployment register. 'Great', I said, 'you've got a job.' 'No', was his reply, 'But my God has promised to supply all my needs and I am claiming the promise, so I don't need any state benefits.' I'm ashamed to say that my scepticism was weaker than my cowardice. I wished him well and moved on. A few weeks later I met him again in the local shopping centre - he had his young son with him. Hi, how's things?' 'It's Peter's birthday today' he told me 'I haven't got a penny to buy him anything.' Another 'claimed' promise not fulfilled.

On a personal note, Monica told me with joy that she had claimed a promise that she and I were to be married. When I replied that God hadn't mentioned the matter to me that was merely a sign that I wasn't listening to God and that marriage to her would soon put that right. Nothing I could say or do would convince her otherwise. She even told me the date and place. Such was my lack of faith - or more likely sheer terror - that I surreptitiously checked my diary and can't describe the relief when I saw I was scheduled to be out of town all that weekend. Even so, I have to admit getting into my car with a lurking anxiety that it might not work or that it would break down at the outskirts of town.

You'll have guessed that at this point that my scepticism about this 'claiming the promise' turned into utter disbelief and down-right hostility.

So, what are the promises of God and what might we define as fulfillment?

I'm not qualified to be able to give a definitive or even an approximate answer but simply offer you my experience of living in the light of promise and in the hope of fulfillment.

Over the many years I have been a Christian I have moved from certainty to doubt; from having most - if not all - of the answers to living with questions; a paradigm shift from the absolute to the unsettled. That's why I choose as the second reading the poem by R S Thomas where he articulates succinctly the frustrations and uncertainty of belief, because I also would have given up long ago except that once - just once - I thought I saw the movement of a curtain.

Yet there is one promise of which I have hope both in the now and the not yet. It's the promise from Matthew's gospel and which contains yet another great 'I am' *'and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.'*

It is a promise of Christ that doesn't rest upon claiming, unswerving faith, or goodness or adherence to laws. Not even how much we pray, or read the Bible or attend Church. It depends simply on the faithfulness of Christ.

It is the promise of God at his birth - Emmanuel - God with us. The promise of Christ at the last supper - that where I am you will be also.

It is the promise of the cry on the cross 'it is finished/completed. And the promise here, after the resurrection. *'I am with you - always.'* Although I say it is a sure promise of Christ, that does not, for me, make it easy to always believe.

The story is told of the man who had never given a lot of thought to God until the day he slipped off a cliff and found himself dangling by his fingertips. Below him was a long and almost certainly fatal fall. 'God' he cried 'If you're there, help me!'

The answer came back 'My son, I am here, let go, I will catch you.' After a moment, and in desperation, 'is there anyone else there?' In spite of being deeply immersed in the Christian world, speaking most weeks at some university or church around the country, the time came when I felt a calling of God to - in the words of Luke's Gospel - 'put out into deep waters.' This for me meant giving up preaching and teaching, moving away from the limelight - however faded it was - to the wings and taking time out to re-think almost everything I once thought I knew. In particular I needed to take time to find ways of reconciling my faith with my sexuality and I knew that this could mean losing friends, support, livelihood, reputation and my place in the Church. Yet I felt that this was a call of God and it was the text I choose

for the last sermon I preached some 16 years ago and I haven't spoken publicly in a church until today.

I listened recently to a recording of that sermon and, to be honest had I known what was to be involved in setting out into deep waters I doubt I would have had the courage to have left the shallows. Churches and Christian Unions, once delighted to have me speak, stopped inviting me. Some people crossed the road rather than talk to me. Some supporters withdrew their support and some people I had spent many years with now decided that the journey I was on was wrong in both intent and direction and that they would leave me to it.

It was Andre Gide who said 'One does not discover new lands without consenting to loose sight of the shore for a very long time.' And that has been true of my own experience and for us as a church community as we have found ourselves in the many strange and difficult places our redevelopment has taken us to and perhaps for some of you in your own Christian journey too.

I have capsized many times, tried to turn back, been becalmed and not moved for months, failed frequently, regretted setting out and railed regularly at God for telling me do this stupid thing.

Unlike the disciples in the gospel I don't think I've ever caught any fish... and don't even think I want to. I have survived - just - though there have been a number of times when I seriously didn't think I would, and even times when I wasn't sure I wanted to.

It was a call of God and, as far as I know, there was no promise with it – except this '*lo I AM with you – even to the end of the age.*' I haven't come to the end of THE age or the end of MY age – but thus far this I know for me and for you – the 'I am' is with us and will continue to be with us.

I have particularly asked that we sing for one of our hymns tonight the old hymn, Abide with me. Taken from the account in the Acts of the Apostles when two disciples are walking on the road to Emmaus and joined by Jesus. They come to the end of their journey and say to Him – the day is far spent, the evening has come, abide with us.

Three years ago I was in Bangalore and visiting a hospice for people living with HIV. I was shown around the wards and rooms and greeted with warmth and welcome. Towards the end of my visit I was taken into a side room to visit a young man decimated by the disease and clearly dying. He was covered in sores from injecting drugs, emaciated and in great pain. As I entered he could hardly move his head or raise a hand in greeting.

In the room with him was a young woman who I took to be a relative but was told no - she comes to sing. 'Sing?' I asked. The doctor turned to me and said 'Sometimes' he said 'it's all we have.'

I asked if she might sing while I was there with the young man and I sat on his bed cradling his feet while she began a haunting, melancholy and beautiful song. I had to ask what she was singing, 'She is singing Jesus be with me, Jesus be with me' I was told...and I looked at the young man who was so frail and weak he'd got no voice left as he mouthed the words to her song in fear, and hope 'Jesus be with me, Jesus be with me.'

It was one of those times when it seemed to me that the whole of heaven bent down and it was there, in that barren room. I learnt something of the fulfillment of promise as it seemed to me

that the tender voice of God was saying to this beautiful young man who was about to embark on his own journey into the deep waters of God, 'My son, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.'

Amen.