

*“Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness”* ST. MATTHEW 6.33

I'm sure all of us gathered here are familiar with the idea of a *promise*. A promise is an agreement that we make with one another as a guarantee that something will happen the way we say it will. Depending on our circumstances, a promise can be an almost sacred event. Think of a pinky promise as children: a pinky promise is one of the most solemn forms of promise one can make. Our ability to keep promises becomes tied with our own trustworthiness. If you know your friend keeps breaking promises, you're not likely to keep trusting them with more promises or secrets, are you? Meanwhile, if you have a reputation of keeping your promises, then you are more likely to keep being granted the privilege of having more of them.

Well, all three of our readings this morning have to do with promises in one form or another. In fact, it's not just our readings today, but you could almost say that all of Scripture, from cover to cover, has to do with promises – God's promises. The Bible teaches us that our God is a God of promises: a God who makes promises, and a God who keeps promises. What he says is true, and he proves it time and time again – maybe not right away, but in his own time.

Let's start with our Old Testament lesson from the book of Joshua. As you may or may not recall, Joshua was appointed leader of the Israelites after the death of Moses. Moses had led the people out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and into the desert for forty years. Because of sins committed by the Israelites under Moses' leadership, God forced that group to wander the desert and said that none of that generation would enter the Promised Land. At the end of those forty years, Moses died, Joshua was appointed the leader, and the people finally entered the Promised Land. The great bulk of the book of Joshua chronicles what the Israelites *did* once they finally got into the land: warring against other armies, dividing the land among their tribes, establishing the Law in the land, and setting up the religious order. Finally, at the end of the book – that part we were just reading – Joshua knows he will soon die and calls together all the Tribes of Israel for a final exhortation. Perhaps this is a scene some of you are familiar with: before dying, maybe a member of your family has called you together to pass along their final wishes and goodbyes. No doubt, this is an important moment. In this case, the verses before our reading tell us that *“Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel. And they presented themselves before God.”*

Once assembled, he passes on a message that he has received from God that outlines all the promises God has made to the people until this point, and how he had delivered them from their enemies. Finally, our reading began, *“Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living.”* The people of Israel faced a choice. They had just been told all about the goodness of the LORD, and now were told to abandon the idols they had collected and turn instead to him. Of course, the way this story is told, they didn't have much choice. The people responded by basically saying, “well, we know that God did all these great things for us, so of course we'll follow him forever!” And Joshua wrote this promise down in the Book of the Law.

Immediately after the book of Joshua follows the book of Judges. It directly carries on from this promise the people of Israel just made to Joshua. In it, there is a cyclic pattern that goes something like this: the people loved God, the people strayed away from God, God sent a “judge” to sort them out, the people loved God again, and so forth. This up and down cycle continued through to King David and King Solomon, who loved God, and then the books of Kings and Chronicles tell us again about the apostasy of the Israelites until God kicks them out of the Promised Land again. All the while, God reminds the people of a promise he made with Abraham, and renewed with Abraham's descendants: if you dedicate all the males of your family to me by circumcision, I will

keep your people in favour and make you the father of many nations. I am, of course, simplifying this a fair bit, but this is the covenant – the promise – that God made with the people of Israel.

Now that, I admit, is a bit of a long-winded introduction to my point: that God keeps his promises. But stay with me! Our next stop along the way is to our Second Lesson, from the Epistle to the Galatians. Now, Paul, as we know, is himself a Jew. He was a Pharisee before he was converted on the road to Damascus, and he tells us elsewhere that according to the Jewish Law, he was perfect and justified. In this reading we have today, Paul talks to the Galatian Christians about circumcision – about fulfilling that part of the covenant we were just talking about. The Galatian Christians, though Gentiles, were being persecuted for their Christian faith, and they had started to circumcise themselves so that they could “fit in” (for lack of a better term) with the Jews. Paul says, “sure, you’re fulfilling this part of the Law, but lots of people who are circumcised don’t follow the Law, even if they are the ones asking you to do it”. Don’t Glory in the flesh, he says, but glory in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, who’s crucifixion has changed everything! Sure, I carry this marker of the Law, he says, but what’s more important is that I, and you, carry markers of the Lord Jesus. Paul is saying that Jesus’ death has fulfilled the Law. Earlier in this letter, he says that by the Lord, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus”.

When we talk about the Old Testament Covenant, Jesus is its fulfillment. The Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament are clear about this. The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel both prophesied that the Old Covenant would be fulfilled and replaced by God in time. In the Gospel according to St. Matthew, Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt 5.17). When God promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that they would be the fathers of all nations, it was because Jesus would come to rule in the hearts of all people, whether Jew or Gentile. God kept his promise of the covenant, and now continues to keep his promises through Jesus, who promises us everlasting life in Him – His New Covenant. And to get us to this eternal life, God will forgive sin and restore fellowship among those whose hearts are turned toward Him and repent and believe. This is the promise of the Gospel. He knows that we, like those people of Israel who kept loving Him, and turning away from Him, will do the same thing – and he has given us a way to break the cycle: to turn to Jesus and repent for our misdeeds.

So, then, the Gospel reading we have today is nothing short of an affirmation that God will indeed fulfill all that he has promised us. It is a reminder from Jesus that we can depend on God, and *must* depend on God. God is *the* only thing we can be sure about. Jesus gives us a choice – much like Joshua did to the Israelites – to choose to whom we are loyal. Do we serve God, or do we serve mammon (the things of the world)? In a world so full of anxiety, of sadness, of fear, of societal inequalities, Jesus tells us cast all our cares on God, “for [our] heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things”, he says. We know that God keeps his promises. He sent his only Son to die for our sins as a fulfillment to an ancient promise he made. His Son rose from the dead and defeated death for our benefit. When we are in need, we turn to God in prayer and repentance. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Be ye not therefore anxious about the morrow; for the morrow shall take care of itself.”

When we pray the collect this week, we remember the struggles of the Israelites who kept falling away from God. We pray: “because the frailty of man without thee cannot but fall, keep us ever by thy help from all things hurtful, and lead us to all things profitable for our salvation”. Jesus is our Rock. Jesus is our saviour. In the words of the old hymn:

*“Are we weak and heavy laden,  
cumbered with a load of care?  
Precious Savior, still our refuge--  
take it to the Lord in prayer!”*

**Amen.**