

Christianity is fuelled by promises. The earliest of these came to Noah – a promise by God to be careful with God’s divine power. Then to Abraham, Issac and Jacob – and again to Moses, the Kings of Israel, the Judges and prophets – each of whom found hope in the promises of God - a hope they extended to us down the years.

And the promises found voice again in Jesus – and some two thousand years ago, the promises were given new life – people found new hope.

But promises are funny things.

We are often suspicious— having our own unique experiences with promises not kept. We hold the promises of God to be something special, but the promised peace – the promise of new life in a new kingdom – these are hard to verify, since much of our theology has placed these goals ‘outside of this life.’

Our hymns promise relief and resolution ‘on the other side.’ Popular theology would have us lining up either to be swept up into God’s arms or cast out into bitter darkness. Out of fear and suspicion, we have reduced the idea of God’s promises to something unworthy of the name. And once we do that, it’s hard to find hope again.

We’ve had more than two thousand years to formulate our faith. Prophets are hard to find, and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus has been told (and re-told) with the frequency of a soap opera. We say it is gospel (Good News), but we struggle to find the good in it. Sure, promises ring out from our hymns and populate our prayers, but the essence of the ancient covenant is hard to grasp.

So we gather, week after week, and try to work it out together. We listen as Jeremiah shouts from the shadows of history – “Any day now...” he says.

And we hang on Jesus' words, whose disturbing parables of death and new life tempt us into believing that God had something better in mind – something better than we have settled for.

These two, separate proclamations – generations removed from one another – seem, at first, to be opposed. The first a signal that God will be more transparent – more approachable. “I will put my law withing them...they shall all know me” says the prophet on God's behalf. This sounds like the sort of promise we can get excited about. God sorting things out. Getting directly involved. The days are surely coming, says the Lord...which begs the question, how will we know?

Jesus, in his time, paints a bleaker picture. The metaphor is stark. The single grain is not much use except that it falls into the earth...and dies. Jesus is our favourite – until he starts talking about hating our life – losing it – to gain some glorious promise. Those of us who love life get cold feet quickly when this text is offered as grace on the first day of the week.

And of course, promises are funny things.

God will be with us – so says Jerimiah...and the Christmas story. A people of The Law – once ruled by the stark binaries of clean and unclean, righteous and unrighteous, sacred and profane, will learn the subtleties of the spirit behind the law; loving neighbour and praying for enemies and stuff like that. And oddly, the life they thought they loved will become dead to them as they seek to follow Jesus.

That's the funny thing about God's promises.

As we think them through and puzzle them out – what do they mean? How can this be? – we are lead, slowly but surely, to new ways of thinking, acting and being. If we give Jesus' words time to work their way into our suspicious minds, something wonderful can happen:

The old certainties disappear, and new life – abundant life – is slowly but surely revealed.

The promises of God are one promise, really. The rainbow – the land of milk and honey – the law on our hearts – the divine in our midst. All these are pieces of the larger puzzle. The sacred promise of God's presence.

God with us – the name we use to understand the significance of Jesus at his birth (Emmanuel) – this is the promise in a nutshell. Not some sort of supernatural protection, but presence in every circumstance. Not some land held apart for our glory, but a creation reflecting the glory of the Creator. Not the smug satisfaction of pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die-by-and-by, but the quiet confidence that you face nothing in life apart from the comfort of God, who loves us.

Jeremiah described it a way that his generation could understand. Jesus was the living, breathing example of the promise. His trials – his crucifixion – even his death could not mute the promise. God was present. Love prevailed. The Easter triumph is the promise at it's finest. The beginning of our hope.