

Throughout their generations

On the face of it, Jesus rebuke of Peter seems harsh - get behind me Satan, and all that. Jesus had already proven pretty good at standing up to the tempter and this doesn't strike me as at all comparable to Jesus' earlier temptation in the wilderness...

But it is the statement that follows that puts us in an odd position: 'You are setting your mind, not on divine things, but on human things. 'This is the justification for Jesus' harsh judgement of Peter. Keep your focus on God, he says, not on worldly concerns. And if I'm being honest I want to know how is that possible?

There's a lot of earthly stuff that is crucially important for our survival. We need - especially in this century - to be able to navigate economic, political, social and personal entanglements. Because we are human, the here and now; the flesh and blood; the HUMAN THINGS are important - there's no avoiding them.

But as I mentioned as we opened our congregational meeting on Thursday, the challenge of living out our faith - the (existential tension) that is necessary if we wish to follow Jesus comes from the constant acknowledgement that divine things are happening within the human realm.

Too many have taken Jesus' statement to mean that the world - the human world - is only an unfortunate testing ground for those who desire a heavenly reward; messy but necessary. You see these people from time to time - rushing through life with an attitude of dread - not getting involved - hoping not to be tainted - so they can arrive at heaven's gates unblemished and ready to (finally) live for God.

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Occasionally whole groups will divorce themselves from the world - living in isolation, trying desperately to avoid the 'unholy influences' of worldly things: and no matter how noble the intentions of these groups, there are problems with this kind of split window approach to life in the universe of God's own creation.

Not that we all don't long for something better - and if that 'something better' is only possible in the great beyond, then our prayer ought to be 'take me now, Lord!' - but these words Jesus offers his frustrated disciples weren't intended to split Creation into 'this ugly, sinful place and that beautiful heavenly place.' Because Jesus is rooted in the covenant to Abraham. Jesus embodies the One whose promise of help and presence extends untold generations into the here and now. Divine things are also (often) human things. We are invited to pay attention - to try and spot the difference.

When God calls to Abram and offers a promise and changes Abram's name, the rules concerning human relations with the divine are forever changed for the promised descendants of Abraham. Yes, Abraham gets a new name, but think about the way this covenant is expressed. God's intent is declared: "I will make MY covenant...[I] will make you exceedingly numerous...I will make nations of you...I will give you the land...I will be their God." All of the action - all of the promises - begins with God. God declares, not just an interest in the welfare of Abraham's future family, but also a commitment to God's involvement in human affairs - 'throughout their generations.'

And what is required of Abraham and those promised generations? Only that they (starting with Abraham) "keep my covenant."

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Keep is one of those words in the English language that is very versatile. It can mean “to hold, retain or restrain; to conduct or manage; to treasure; to safeguard; to be faithful to; to persist or endure” We are asked to ‘keep things safe’ or to keep things secret. We expect drivers to keep the rules of the road, and ask cyclists to keep to the path. So how do we (as spiritual descendants of Abraham) Keep covenant with God - especially a covenant which suggests that God will do much of the heavy lifting?

It’s a reasonable question, since the Hebrew word used in Genesis has a similar range of meaning (based on how it is used throughout Scripture.) Because our default position with biblical covenants seems to be fixated on ‘these are the rules, don’t stray from them...or else...’ we imagine that covenant keeping leaves a heavy burden on us. But Abraham is given nothing to do except “keep” covenant - to preserve and maintain the memory of this enormous thing that God is promising. Abraham’s task - and ours in due time - is to remember that God is active; to act according to God’s promise to be OUR GOD - throughout the generations.

This is a promise for our here and now - not some ‘pie in the sky when you die’ pledge of allegiance. And in the here and now, we recognize both the humanity of our circumstances and the certainty of divine involvement in those circumstances. The covenant with Abraham declares - and Jesus rebuke suggests - that there is no use denying the intersection of the human and the Holy. God is keeping God’s promise. We, as heirs of Abraham, are called to keep that promise front of mind.

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Failing to 'keep covenant', we quickly lose hope. If we are unwilling to consider "heavenly things" in our midst, then we miss the true miracle of God's promise to Abraham - a promise that allowed Abraham to live in jubilant hope, though he never had a permanent home, nor a national identity. Abraham's choice to 'keep the covenant' - to trust in God's potential - has come to define faith for us. And that faith promises us everything. Not just at some future celebration in glory, but in the midst of our very human concerns.

God is true to God's part of the bargain - God has been (and always will be) faithful to the covenant. God offers Jesus as further proof of faithfulness - of a willingness (even eagerness) to be ***with us***. And all that has ever been expected of us is that we remember that.