

Fifth Sunday after Trinity | 5 July 2026 | 10:45 Eucharist

A novel by Damon Galgut – *The Promise* - won the 2021 Booker Prize. It's a novel with an unusual narrative style, a narrator who is difficult to pin down because you're never quite certain of their perspective. As it begins, an Afrikaans family in South Africa gather for the first of several family funerals that take place over a long period of time.

There are tensions on each occasion the family meets up. At one level it's an ordinary family experiencing the move from Apartheid to new South Africa. But deep within its story is the woman, black, a servant, who has worked for the family for many years. From me it's recommended and captivating reading!

As the mother is dying her youngest daughter hears the husband promise that on his wife's death the family servant would receive, as a gift, the ownership of the house that she lives in, just over the hill from the family home. It's this promise that is referred to in the title and it becomes clear that the promise was not and is not being kept.

This is the underlying theme of the book. A promise not kept and the repercussions of it not being kept cascading down through succeeding generations. A broken promise, yes, but also the question about whether it was an appropriate promise to make in the first place?

And the repercussions of a promise not being fulfilled is not a bad way into today's Old Testament reading. It's the narrative of Isaac and Rebecca, with Abraham's servant and Laban, Rebecca's brother, as the supporting cast. Bar the story of Joseph, it's the longest discreet story in the book of Genesis. We are only given a few excerpts but enough to get the flow. It's all framed by the death of Sarah, Abraham's elderly wife. Not only does Abraham have the responsibility of ensuring that Isaac finds a wife within the wider family, but Abraham is the carrier of God's covenant promise, as is Isaac, into the next generation. Without the right wife, the promise is at risk of not being kept and fulfilled as the generations pass by.

There is an *oath* as Abraham directs his most loyal servant. There is a *journey* back to the northeast into Abraham's home territory where his brother Nahor lives, whilst Isaac stays in the land of Canaan, the land of promise. There is a *sign* as Rebecca by the well looks after not only the servant but also the camels, just as the servant desired. There is *negotiation* as jewels are exchanged and family introductions are made.

This is a story that comes from a vastly different culture to ours with practices and attitudes we can only find difficult to grasp – yet we can recognize a story with love and romance at its heart, for the first time in the Old Testament. The story also marks God at work in a new register.

Until now in the Genesis narrative, God has spoken in dramatic interventions – the act of creation, the flood, the tower of Babel, and revealing himself directly at the Oaks of Mamre, and in the covenant visions to Abraham.

Now, it's God at work in the domestic sphere, not overtly but through the processes of human living. The servant is an example – someone who walks with God, is guided by God in the everyday, who listens to that 'still small voice of calm'. God is in the ordinary action, working his purpose out from day to day. It's as if after the drama of the beginning of working his promise out, God is settling down to influence and guide the ordinary behind the scenes!

That's not to say everything becomes straightforward. We know that from the story of Rebecca who favours one of her children over another with deep consequences for the next generation. As Israel develops each generation tests the patience of God in keeping to his promise. There are times when the nation feels abandoned by God and confronts the repercussions of broken promises in lamentation.

Our readings this morning are therefore set in the context of God's promise renewed generation after generation. Not only a promise that is renewed but also unfolded in its depth and significance: the promise of land becomes the assurance of a universal kingdom: the promise of a new people becomes the gathering of humanity in all its diversity. A promise that finds its fulfilment in Christ is the promise of the creation of the new heavens and the new earth, brought into being in the power of the Resurrection.

And our two other readings enable us to enter the power of God's promise in our generation.

The great apostle St Paul in Romans chapter 7 wrestles with God's promise to change the human heart to the purposes of God's kingdom. No question that this happened on the Road to Damascus but taking his experience to a deeper level is proving challenging. His day-to-day experience is that he is unable to do what is right.

He knows what is good, he desires to do what is good, but he is unable to put his faith into practice. If someone knows what is good to do but simply cannot perform then that person cannot be seen as good. He has the law as his guide, yet the law can only give knowledge of what is good, it cannot overcome and defeat the power of sin that is written like the letters through a stick of rock right through the human situation, making us unable to be good.

Paul is complex at times and it's probable, in my view, that he is describing his experience, journey and reflections on the power of Christ in the years following his conversion. It's only the power of the risen Jesus, and God's love released in resurrection that has the power to change the human heart and enable good to be done! Sin is so deeply embedded in human nature – that it's only the creator God, revealed in the power of love, which can bring about the flourishing of humanity that God's promise to Abraham anticipated: that God would bring into being a new people, made possible by the transformation of the human heart for the purposes of the common good.

And when we reach St Matthew's Gospel we invited to receive more of God's promise. 'Come to me, all who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.' Well-rehearsed words in the Christian tradition, yet how well do we understand them?

William Barclay, the Church of Scotland biblical scholar, who died in 1978, reflected creatively on Jesus' promise. The image of the yoke is agricultural – two oxen joined together, the wooden

cross-piece helping the two animals to pull in the same direction. Barclay discovered that the meaning of the word 'easy' in this context meant well-fitting and he wrote:

'In Palestine, ox-yokes were made of wood: the ox was brought and the measurements were taken. The yoke was then roughed out, the ox was brought back to have the yoke tried out. The yoke was carefully adjusted so that it would fit well and not gall the neck of the patient beast. The yoke was tailor-made to fit the ox.'

You get the imagery. Jesus promises those of us who have grown weary and who feel we are carrying heaving burdens and who long that our souls might have rest – Jesus promises us a yoke that we can wear with a light touch, which is easy-fitting and tailor-made for our own circumstances. Joined and held by Christ and in partnership with him.

Travelling in the same direction, more effective than walking alone, recharging at the same time as moving forward, our steps mirroring Christ's steps, learning from the one who is both God and human, in constant and meaningful conversation.

In the tradition of Judaism out of which the Apostle Paul is speaking a young convert would be described as being 'yoked to the law'. But now, what the law was to ancient Israel, so Jesus is now to the Christian. Our partner in the kingdom of God is the living and risen Jesus, or rather we are partners with him.

We are yoked – not to a set of human principles that lay heavily on our shoulders but to the living Christ. Being yoked to Jesus is about attending to the quality of our soul, that spiritual core of who we are, that part of us that gives us our identity before God. It's as we attend to the quality of our souls that we know who we really are; it's in our souls that we know how we are responding to the powerful love of God in the transformation of the human heart; it's in our souls that we are aware of the work of God within us and through us in this, God's world just like Abraham's servant. We trust in the one whose promise is always fulfilled and never broken and who invites us into the breadth and depth of its scope.

The contrast, of course, is between human promises that may or may not be kept or be even appropriate to make and the promises of God that meets our needs for rescue and salvation, brings about God's kingdom, grows in its significance and reach, enables human flourishing, and endures across the generations. This is the gospel we proclaim! May we live always in the life of God's promise!

The Very Revd Dr Peter Robinson, Dean of Derby