

## Making Promises

I want us to think this morning about Promises. When would you make a promise?

We make promises to show someone that we are serious about doing something – “I promise that I will take you to the football on Saturday” or “I promise that I will do my chores”. Is anyone here in a uniformed organisation like the Scouts, Guides, Cubs, Brownies, Beavers or Rainbows? When you join these organisations you make a promise, promising to do your best, to develop your beliefs and to help other people, and all members of the organisation make that promise so that all Scouts or Guides across the world are committed to sharing the values of Scouting and Guiding.

When we make a promise we might just give our word to another person that we will do something but sometimes we give something to another person as a sign of our promise. If I agree to do work for someone I might sign a piece of paper called a contract to show that I promise that I will do the work that I have said I will.

One of the most important promises I ever gave was when I got married and promised to love Fiona for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health – and she made the same promise to me and as a sign of our promise to each other we gave each other rings which we wear everyday as a constant reminder of the promise that we made to each other.

God has made lots of promises to us in the bible. One of the earliest was in the story of Noah and the ark, when after the flood had receded, God promised Noah that he would never again send a flood like that on the Earth and he put a rainbow in the sky as a sign of the promise that he had made, so that everytime that we see a rainbow in the sky we are reminded of God’s promise to us.

This is just one of God’s many promises to us in the Bible. In fact, when the worship team were preparing this sermon Bab’s showed me this, which I had never seen before. It is called a Promise Box. It is a small box, in which are stored 144 tiny scrolls – so small you need tweezers to get them out - and on each of these scrolls is one of God’s promises to us that we find in the bible. When soldiers were going to fight in the First World War, some of them gave boxes like these to their wives or girlfriends so that they would find comfort and reassurance in God’s promises during that difficult time.

In Zechariah 9:9-13, we read the words that a man named Zechariah said to the Israelites, who were God’s chosen people. Zechariah had been sent as a messenger from God and he tells them God’s promise that he will send them a King. He tells them that he will be a powerful king – “He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth” and also telling the people that the new king will come to them “riding on a donkey”.

The people were very excited that this new king would come and as God has said he would rule from sea to sea they thought that this new King would lead them to victory over all of their enemies. But God didn’t tell them when he was going to send this King. So the people waited year after year for God to send this King that he had promised, until more than 500 years after Zechariah told them God’s promise, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, exactly as God had promised he would, and the people celebrated the arrival of God’s promised King spreading their cloaks and palm leaves in front of him as he arrived.

That is why we now celebrate that day as Palm Sunday, remembering Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem and God keeping his promise.

And because God kept his promise we can trust in him that he will continue to keep his promises to us which we can read in our bibles. We don't need him to sign a contract or give us a ring or send a rainbow as a sign of his promise – we can have faith in him, which means that we can trust him, because he made a promise to the whole world and kept it which we will be remembering over the next week as we celebrate Easter.

### Keeping Promises

If someone makes you a promise, do you believe that they will keep it? I would guess that for most of you it would depend who was making the promise. If one of the people on the screen was making the promise would you believe it? In the run up to elections politicians make generous promises of what they will do in power, but when they get there they find that delivering on those promises is not easy – and the road to political power is littered with promises made that haven't been kept.

However, if the promise is made by the people close to us, who we trust then we believe that they will keep it. Harold Huggins and Mack McClain were best friends, who fought together in the American army during World War II. They fought at Anzio Beach, Italy, scene of one of the bloodiest battles of World War II. Mack had a premonition that he wouldn't make it out of there alive, so he gave Harold some mementos, a belt, some photos, and said: "Give this to my sister, tell her that I love her," Huggins recalled.

Harold promised if anything happened to Mack he would do what was asked. During the battle, Mack was killed in an artillery barrage. After the war, Harold looked for Mack's sister but he never found her until many years later when his daughter sent out e-mails to various veterans' groups. Some California veterans found Mack's sister, Grace, whose last name changed when she married.

57 years after he made the promise, at the veterans' memorial in Marysville, California on which Mack's name is engraved, Harold Huggins kept that promise, meeting Mack's sister for the very first time and giving her the mementos that he had promised his fallen friend he would deliver. Mack had trusted that his friend would keep the promise that he would make, and even though it took many years, that faith was repaid.

Mack trusted that his friend and comrade would keep the promise that he had made to him and that trust was rewarded, even though it took longer than either of them might have expected, Harold kept his promise to him.

Our belief that a promise will be kept depends on who made the promise and the trust and faith that we have in them. So my question for you this morning is do we have faith that the promises that God has made will be kept?

When God made his promise to the Israelites, through Zechariah, that he would send a King, which we read in Zechariah 9:9-13, the Israelites had been allowed to return to Jerusalem after their exile in Babylon and were in the process of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, following its destruction by King Nebuchadnezzar during the siege of Jerusalem. So the promise of a King whose "Rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth" would have given them great reason to celebrate- a king will come and restore Israel. How they must have looked forward to the day when God would fulfil his promise. For more than 500 years after Zechariah made the promise, the people waited. I am sure that there will have been times where they began to doubt that the promise would be kept or thought that God should keep his send the King at that time because it seemed to them the correct time, but only God knew when the correct time to keep the promise

was – and on the Sunday before Passover- many years after Zechariah prophesied it, Matthew tells us that Jesus entered Jerusalem, humbly riding on the back of a donkey, exactly as he had promised in the prophecy. God had kept his promise – he has sent a king to his people in exactly the way he promised.

God makes many promises to us in the Bible. The Old Testament is full of promises God makes to his people, often through prophets like Zechariah. In the first verse of his second letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul writes, “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ” and Jesus himself said in words we heard a few weeks ago in Matthew 5 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.” All of the promises God made in the Old Testament are fulfilled in the coming of Christ. But God then makes further promises to us in the New Testament. I talked earlier about Promise boxes, and as I looked through some of the 144 promises that the one Babs had kindly lent me contained it was a stark reminder of just how much God has promised to us and it only contains a portion of all the promises he makes to all of us who believe in him.

But do we believe that those promises will be kept or do doubts creep in when we look at the world in which we live? Maybe we believe that we know how or when God is going to fulfil his promises and are disappointed when what we expect doesn’t happen. If that is the case, then we should remember the events of Palm Sunday and the week that followed it. God had made his promise to the Israelites through Zechariah but it was more than 500 years later that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey to fulfil the prophecy. But it is interesting to look at what those celebrating Jesus’ arrival think is happening. In v9 Matthew tells us the crowds that gathered shouted

“Hosanna to the Son of David!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

They are quoting from Psalm 118, which we read from in our call to worship this morning. However, whilst we think of Hosanna as an exclamation of praise, if you look at the footnotes for this verse in Matthew 21 you will see that this was not what it meant to the Jews who were welcoming Jesus – Hosanna was a Hebrew expression meaning “Save”

If you look back to Psalm 118 v25 then you will see that instead of Hosanna there it says “Lord, save us!”. Those who had gathered recognised that Jesus was the King that God had promised and are shouting out to him to Save them – they are expecting that now that their King has arrived he will get rid of their Roman overlords and restore Israel to independence and glory. Yet a week later Jesus had been crucified, this King that they had celebrated on Palm Sunday had been put to death on the cross and was gone. It seemed that God hadn’t kept his promise to his people after all.

Now, as we will see as we celebrate Easter this week, that wasn’t the case. Christ was a conquering King – Jesus was raised from the dead, conquered sin, and death and He is a great and glorious King in the presence of God. God did keep his promise – the righteous and victorious King described by Zechariah came in Christ and through the events we celebrate this week conquered.

But this wasn’t what those who celebrated his arrival had expected – and that is often the case when we have doubts about God’s promises – God doesn’t do things how or when we expect so, like many when they say Jesus crucified, we begin to doubt that he will keep his promise. But we have seen God keep his promise to send a King into the world when Christ came into our world to live amongst

us an ultimately die for us on the cross. Given this, why should we ever doubt that he will keep his other promises to us?

Looking back on my own life, I can see times where I have felt abandoned and that God hasn't kept his promises to me – usually when times have been particularly difficult - but when I look back on them now I see that God has been at work at those times in my life, but sometimes in ways or at times which were different to what I expected. God has kept his promises to me and to all of us – but it is on his terms not ours, and in our culture which encourages us to think about what we want this can be difficult for us to take.

Those who were here last week will have heard the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead from John 11 and as part of that story, Jesus makes a promise and it is a promise for you and for me. Before Jesus raised Lazarus he said to his sister Martha, " 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to Him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I Am the Resurrection and the Life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?' This is a big promise and we with Martha are charged with the question " Do you believe this?" We see the faith that Martha has when she responds immediately "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." Are we able to answer as confidently as Martha?

It may be that you find it hard to believe that God can do this? Maybe because it is beyond what we as humans can understand you struggle to believe? Or maybe you believe that it can be done but believe that you are not good enough to be saved, that your sin creates too big a barrier for God to get past. Or maybe you are here and not really sure whether you believe in God at all or are questioning. Well like with other people we can only believe the promises that God makes if we have faith in him and trust what he tells us. If other people keep previous promises that they make to us then we are more likely to believe them. We have looked today at how God kept his promise to send a King and if we take time to study God's word we learn how, through Christ, he fulfils many of the promises that he made, which should give us faith that we can believe in God to keep his promise of grace – that we will live forever with him.

Also, if we have doubts about whether we can trust someone we will often talk to them to help alleviate any doubts or worries that we may have, if we have doubts about God why don't we do the same and bring our concerns and doubts to him in prayer. He can see our hearts, He already knows when we doubt and all He's waiting for is to see whether we will ask for His help with our unbelief. So when we come across promises of God that we have trouble believing, we need to ask God for help overcoming our doubt.

As we come to Easter we see God fulfilling his promise that he made through Zechariah, that a King would come into the world and this week we celebrate that King, Christ Jesus, and his death and resurrection. But as we look back to the first Palm Sunday approximately 2000 years ago, we also look forward to a similar event still to come, what John describes in the last book of the Bible, in Revelation 7 *"After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands."* We celebrate that God sent Jesus into the world but also look forward to when he will come again, that through the events of Easter God has made another promise to us all – a wonderful promise that through Christ's sacrifice our sins are forgiven and we will all be able to live eternally with God. And because of Easter we can have faith that this will another promise that God will keep.