

Sunday 4th September 2022
Genesis 15:1-6 & Romans 4:1-16
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Brightons Parish Church

Sermon keypoints:

- Theology of children
- Sacraments: signs and seal of God's promise
- Baptism and the response of faith

Let us take a moment to pray before we think about God's Word:

Come Holy Spirit and soften our hearts to the Word of God.

Come Holy Spirit to mature and strengthen our faith.

Come Holy Spirit with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

We're in this new series on Covenants and sacraments and last week we began by exploring a range of scriptures that point to and give a basis to our tradition that we understand children to share in the covenants, and this week builds on that and we also get onto talking about the sacraments, particularly the sacrament of baptism and I must admit that I come before you with a degree of trepidation, apprehension, a measure of internal trembling because today, we touch upon holy things, holy things. I'm also aware that we touch upon things that we might see differently upon and I dearly hope that we maintain unity through all. I'm not wanting to do otherwise. I'm aware I can easily get this wrong. I'm trying prayerfully not to, because I'm still on a journey, I'm still seeking clarity, I'm still asking questions and so, really, I'm sharing with you as far as I've got in my understanding of things. Let me reiterate what I said last week, I'm not necessarily trying to convince you to change rather, I was seeking, through this series together, as a measure of assurance, hopefully, that the transition we find ourselves in, the changes that might come in the months ahead, are biblically grounded and, if we are convinced, then to have even a measure of confidence about what we propose to do as we understand the place and inclusion of children within the life of the church, but also within the covenants. And so within access to the sacraments I said last week at the very end that I'm sure last week raised questions for us, questions I didn't have time to get into and I will seek to engage with them this week and next, though I'll give you a heads-up, I might not give you the answer you're looking for and partly the reason for that is, I think we need to accept there's a degree of mystery here, and I say that because what we're going to get into is a Theology of Children really. I'm not sure that scripture always asks the questions we do and I think partly the reason for that is, within scripture I increasingly see that thread of covenant, of covenant theology woven in the scriptures and so it assumes various conclusions or reaches various conclusions because of that theology and so, as I say, it doesn't raise the questions we do, it doesn't even use the language that we do at times, particularly when it comes to our children.

And so, at the heart, as we think about the place of children, about the meaning of the sacraments, about the right and proper recipients of the sacraments, baptism and communion, at the heart of it is our theology of children and particularly the theology of children of believers because that's what the scripture addresses and that can be very emotive.

And so, I first want us to focus on that and then from there go on to think about baptism and what baptism means in our tradition, which might be different from where you're coming from, if you've come from another tradition and so, I want to take us to a range of different places where I see this thread of covenant woven through the scriptures.

First off, and we're going to go into the Old Testament to begin, to that point in the Old Testament story where David has committed adultery with Bathsheba and a son was born to them but that son dies and in this, probably the hours or days following that, in his season of grief David says this 'Can I bring him back again? (the answer being no) 'I will go to him but he will not return to me.' I will go to him but he will not return to me. We see here in David's words that he has a theology, an understanding, a belief in the eternal life, that there's life beyond death and that this child, he has lost, he will go to be with. There's no question around that in his mind. It is sure, guaranteed. What gives him such confidence? Well, the only thing it can be is the covenant, that children shared in the covenant.

And, if you don't know my story, then this is not hypothetical for us. This is not a lecture in an ivory tower because, just ten days ago, Gill and I marked the seventh anniversary of our first son. This is not hypothetical. So, if children are not in the covenant and then they don't somehow share in God's saving provision then there's really very little comfort.

Last week I quoted Wayne Grudem a number of times and his Systematic Theology is excellent in many ways but I went back to it this week as I approached this issue and this idea of trying to understand the theology of children and, literally, there is scant, scant comfort or hope given about our children. It's almost a bit of a wish rather than any confidence.

So, as we think through the place of children, we do need to think about that dynamic because no one shares in the life eternal except through Jesus.

So, what about the children of believers? Or, let's go into the New Testament where in Ephesians Paul is writing to the church and not only does he address the whole body of believers, he talks to children saying 'Obey your parents and The Lord, for this is right' and he goes on to quote a law from the Old Testament. Then he addresses fathers, really parents in general, 'Do not exasperate your children instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of The Lord.' Now, again, if children are outside the covenant and somehow, they don't share in the things of the Kingdom what are we trying to instruct them in and train them in? Because, if it's trying to follow the ways of Jesus, if it's trying to live out for example the Sermon on the Mount, as we've just looked at, then all you're teaching them, all you're doing to them, is putting a millstone around their neck. And here's why: not one of us, adult or child, can walk in the ways of the Kingdom without the Spirit's help. Various scriptures around that. So, if we are trying to teach our children to walk in the way of The Lord, and they have no chance to do so because they don't belong in the covenant, it's just a millstone round their neck. And it goes into various other aspects. It should not only reshape our thinking around what we do in

Sunday School, it should reshape our thinking around the songs we sing or the prayers we teach them. Over the summer we sang a song at the early service 'This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine', if they don't have the light of Jesus, they shouldn't be singing that song. We shouldn't be teaching them to pray in the name of Jesus because, when we say in the name of Jesus, Amen, it's not some magic words to get what we want. When we say in the name of Jesus, we're saying before God, I don't come in my own merit, I've not earned this, I don't even deserve to be heard, but only because of Jesus, because I share in His righteousness can I come before you my Holy God with confidence. The writer to Hebrews says 'with confidence, with boldness because of Jesus.' No child who's outside the covenant can pray in Jesus' name and genuinely say those words. If children are outside the covenant, the only things we should teach them are God and His character, the history of His dealings with God's people, that they're a bunch of sinners, they need forgiven and that forgiveness is provided by Jesus and they need to repent, and until they do so, well, you can follow the dots in that line.

I think that is literally where it leads us if we follow the logic of our theology of children through, but covenant theology says differently. They're part of the covenant and so they somehow share in the things of the Kingdom and we can instruct them from the earliest of ages to walk in the ways of The Lord.

And let's go on to one of the gospels. Jesus says 'Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.' It's interesting that Matthew omits what the other gospel writers include, where He basically alludes to having child-like faith. Matthew excludes that. Why? Well, Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience, predominantly, a Jewish audience, who would what? Understand the covenants and that children are included in the covenants. And so, Jesus says 'The kingdom of heaven belongs to these children.' You're bringing to me babes in arms and beyond, because they share in the covenant already. Children do not share in the covenant because they're children, none, no one does by right of birth or anything just by being a child. We share in the covenant because God invites us to be part of that covenant and He includes His children. And I had not seen that until this week, until I was pondering how to explain this and how to give us assurance that there is this thread of covenant theology across the scriptures, it's there in the words of Jesus as well. I think often when we come to a theology of children, we develop quite an individualistic, western perspective on it and so, when we raise questions about children, about their place within God's saving purposes, I want their place within the covenant. I'm not sure scripture answers the questions as directly as we'd like or in the language that we'd like and I have avoided certain language and avoided answering your questions a bit directly because I'm not sure the Scriptures do it but they give us these hints that children are included in the covenant and it's there much more plainly in what we looked at last week, and maybe our forefathers, in the reformed faith, got into a bit of trickiness and developed very complicated systems because they felt a pressure to answer the questions rather than except there's a degree of mystery. I don't know how it happened, I don't know exactly what it means but, as I look at the thread across the Scriptures, increasingly, increasingly I'm convinced of children sharing in the covenant.

And so, what is your theology of children? Are they inside or are they outside? They might come to church and we might say that, yes, you're part of the church, but really we're just saying they're part of the organization, the community, they don't really belong to God's people until they've confirmed that, expressed that in some way, until they can give the answer you're looking for. And so, I asked you to follow through the logic of your theology and what would give you comfort in the face of grief, what would guide you and how to disciple our children if you don't hold to this? I'm not saying you have to hold it, I'm not saying that but might we create space to say 'I can see where you're coming from, Scott', you can see where others are coming from. I might not agree to that, I can't get to that place yet, but we can have space for one another?

Now, what I'm outlining is part of the tradition we are part of but it's not just about sacraments, it's also just not about covenants, it's also about sacraments and in our tradition, we have two sacraments, baptism and communion. And communion we'll celebrate in this morning and we'll think a little bit about that when it comes but much more next week. Today the focus is really on baptism. We might be wondering 'Well, why do we use the words 'sacraments'? What is a sacrament?' because it's not a Biblical word. But then again, neither is Trinity so, just because it's not in the Bible doesn't mean we don't use it. It points to something, it's shorthand for something. John Calvin, in his writing, that great reformer said 'A sacrament is an outward sign by which The Lord seals on our consciences the promises of His good will towards us, in order to sustain the weakness of our faith.' So, sacrament is an outward sign, a visible pointing to a promise, to give us assurance, greater reassurance, greater confidence and a promise, and we'll get to that, what that promises in a moment when we're thinking about baptism.

If we're trying to think 'Well, what happens in baptism or what is the symbolism of baptism conveying?' When you turn to the New Testament scriptures it's not as clear as you might think. It's not as clear as you might think and I want to give you a few examples of that, or one example really. Romans chapter 6 verse 3 Paul says a little after what we looked at this morning 'Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus, were baptized into his death.' There are three ways, at least, of interpreting this verse and the first two I would argue are wrong.

So, for example, number one, you might read this and say 'Well clearly this is saying when we're baptized, that's when we're saved, that's when we're baptized into Jesus and sharing His death, that's when we're saved.' And so, maybe we should say that baptism saves you. When, either as a child or an adult, that's when you're saved based on one interpretation of this verse. However, that would be slightly problematic for all the people who are Christians but never been baptized. Or take the thief on the cross, hanging on the cross beside Jesus on Calvary's hill. Is he baptized before he was saved? And Jesus says to him 'You'll share this day in the kingdom of God.' Clearly not so. That interpretation cannot be right. Baptism does not save us.

Interpretation number two, maybe more of a kind of Baptist interpretation we might say or that broad kind of line of thought, that this is talking about baptism portraying our

dying with Jesus and our being raised to life with Jesus. And, in part, we can understand that symbolism however that's not what Paul says. He says 'all of us who were baptized.' So, something happened to us. It's not just portraying something. Something happened in a baptism and we were baptized into His death and every Baptist is going to react and push against that interpretation because of problem number one. Baptism doesn't save us. So, this verse is not about the act of baptism, it's rather pointing to the spiritual dynamics of what happens when we come to faith. That when we come to faith it is like being baptized and we'll talk about what baptism is in a second. And so, it's that spiritual metaphor that Paul's getting at. He's not actually talking about the act of baptism and there are a number of verses, particularly in the epistles, where Paul talks about baptism, but he's not talking about the act of baptism, he's talking about what happened when you came to faith, it was like being baptized, in that moment, it's what he's getting at. And so, we have to be careful about the text we use to understand what happens in baptism and what the symbolism of baptism means and, if we make baptism about our faith, about our response of faith, it also leads into other problems because then, in one part you could argue it's more about us and our response than what we argue for in reformed faith, where it's everything's to the glory of God.

There are other dynamics and other issues but I don't have time to get into them but just some food for thought. So, what is baptism symbolizing. Well, in Acts we read of this and Paul is recounting some of his story and someone said to Paul, 'Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name again.' Baptism doesn't save so that's not what this verse is saying, but, clearly, baptism is a symbolism of sins being washed away through Jesus. It's speaking of our spiritual need and of that need being met through Jesus, The Lord. And, you know, that's the very same thing that circumcision was trying to communicate. Paul, in the passage we read today, said 'Abraham received circumcision as a sign and a seal.' There's that language of John Calvin, a sign and a seal, 'of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. He is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised in order that righteousness might be credited to them.' We saw in the passage in Genesis that, right, Abraham was credited with righteousness because he believed God, and we know from last week, that is in chapter 17, we get the sign of circumcision so he's made right with God, he's forgiven, he's cleansed of his sins before he ever gets circumcision. That's what Paul's argument is here. And so, circumcision was a sign and a seal that righteousness, God will give righteousness, on the basis of faith. That's the promise John Calvin spoke of. A promise, that's the promise that circumcision pointed to and because circumcision and baptism are conveying the same thing, that's what baptism conveys as well. They're both talking about being forgiven, made right with God, of being washed of your sin, based on the promise of God to forgive, on the basis of faith and they point to that internal need and God's promise to do so, to forgive, to make you right in faith.

And so, sacraments are signs and seals of God's promises pointing to God's promise and of our need. In our tradition baptism is not our response of faith, baptism is pointing to our need and God's promise to meet that need when there's faith and actually, then,

children and adults in our tradition are baptized for the same reason. They're not. But an adult is not baptized because of their response of faith, just like our children, when we baptize, we're saying there is this need, a spiritual need to be made right with God and He will, He has promised to meet that need. He extends that promise to us and to our children and so baptism is more about speaking to us, God speaking to us, than us speaking to God. And maybe, that's new for you. Maybe you've never heard it explained that way because, to be honest, prior to I did all this research, neither had I. Even in my training I don't think anyone had conveyed it in quite those terms. And, as I say, I'm not convincing you to change your mind upon that, but trying to help you understand where others of us are coming from. But I think there are benefits in viewing baptism this way because the focus is less on ourselves and more on God, more on His promise which is given, not only to us, but to our children.

But some of you will be saying 'Well, what about faith? Where's faith play a part in all this.' And our tradition does not deny the place of faith, it affirms the place of faith. That faith is still central. It's initiated by faith, a parent, parents come with a child, a babe in arms, to say, I have faith in this promise of God to meet the needs of my child, that somehow, by grace, they are included in the covenant. I don't know how. I don't, can't explain that there's mystery but, but that's what Your Word shows. Lord, I come in faith.' But as a child grows, we call forth a response of faith, to say, 'Own this! You're in it, own it. You've got the membership but you need to share in that. You need to own it. There's no point in just having the card to whatever and never going there,' if you want to put it in such crass term, 'you need to own it, respond in faith, accept the gift.' But, as with all of God's covenants, there's not only the gift, there's also the obligation.

I was having a really great chat with one of our members this week and he was emphasizing to me the need for holiness and the response of faith, to live in holiness. The blessings of Jesus don't come just as blessings, there are also obligations, there's a call to holiness. Do you know that brothers and sisters? There are obligations as well as blessings.' And the same is true for our children. And so, we train them in the ways of the Kingdom. We help them understand the things of The Lord and to grow in that and to walk in that. We call forth faith.

But there is another side, a side we've often avoided, I think, a side which we've shied away from and which has probably meant why our pews are more empty than they maybe should be, of all those children who were baptized in infancy but maybe, now, have walked away because we haven't shared the other side. We've shared the love of God, we've shared the Good News, we've shared that they can be forgiven through Jesus. All those good things and blessings but there's another side. There's a warning and consequences, an obligation and we find it in a number of places within the New Testament. Paul again, writing in Romans, has a picture, describes a picture in chapter 11 of an olive tree and he uses this picture of the olive tree to speak of Israel often, because the Old Testament did that as well, and he says that the people of God are this olive tree but some did not respond in faith, they trusted more in circumcision, they trusted more in their nationality and ethnicity, they didn't respond in faith to the sign that was given and God has actually broken them off, cut them off from the olive tree,,

and he says then that you've been grafted in, new Gentile believers, which includes us to this very day, because I don't think any of us are Jewish, we are those Gentile believers and we have been grafted in he says in romans 11. But he goes on to say this 'Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God. Sternness to those who fell away,' those who were cut off, because they didn't respond in faith 'but kindness to you because you have responded in faith,' and you've been grafted in, 'provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off.' And that warning, that obligation to continue in faith, to persevere in faith until the very end, until we share in the Kingdom of Heaven fully, it's there in Hebrews. Too many verses to utilize and quote today but go and look. That warning that if we take lightly the death of Jesus, if we shun the death of Jesus and turn from Jesus, if we trample underfoot the blood of Jesus, then then, we become a covenant breaker and we're not sharing that covenant anymore. And I'm not saying that your children who were baptized and are no longer part of church, I'm not saying that they've reached that point because only we'll know before the judgment seat of God but that might be the trajectory they're on, because we haven't warned them, we haven't said, you're in the kingdom, you're in the covenant, it's all of grace by faith, it's nothing to do with you, it's not magic because of baptism, you're in there, respond in faith but keep on in faith because of the warnings we read in Scripture and we've ignored that, we've turned from that because it's hard, it's really hard, and I think of members of my family who are no longer children and I'm their child, and I think 'Well, where are you in the faith?' Maybe I need to take this on board and I need to go and have a conversation with those members of my family saying 'Look, look have you turned from Jesus?'

So, faith is everywhere in this tradition. It's initiated by faith or calls forth a response of faith and there's an ongoing faith, both for our children but for us as well, that faith till the very end and Paul has various, numerous various references to that too. Go on and read the Scriptures afresh and you'll see it dotted throughout. Because faith is central and our tradition does not deny that faith in God and His promise, a promise He extends to all, including our children, so that by grace, unearned, unmerited we share in His covenant and saving provision.

This is our God our glorious, loving, faithful, good God, that I'm more passionate about than ever, because I see this in the Scriptures, I want you to share in that confidence or at least that reassurance, that we're not against one another, we're not wanting disunity but that we can understand and make space for one another and it's all to the glory of God now and forevermore. Amen.