

This Sunday brings us almost to the end of our Advent time of waiting. We're on the brink of something tremendous, and our readings are leading us on in best 'page-turner' style. The Bible has been called 'The Greatest Story Ever Told', and it all hinges on a promise, The Greatest Promise Ever Made. It is the story of the complex, turbulent relationship between a middle-eastern tribe and their all-powerful God; the people trying, and repeatedly failing, to live up to what he requires of them. God has made a covenant with his people. They will keep the laws he has given them, and he will protect them, give them victory over their enemies and a fertile land in which to live in peace. The promise is repeated over the generations, to Noah, to Abraham, to Moses, to the different judges, and to Saul.

Now, in our first reading we have David, who, having settled down in Jerusalem, decides that it is time to build a proper house for God. The Israelites have carried the Ark of the Covenant from place to place for centuries, but now they are living peacefully it should have a permanent home. It's time to give back to God, and build him a splendid temple. But it turns out that that isn't what God wants. He still has more to give to David – he will 'make him a house'. He says: 'Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me.'

This isn't a conventional house of bricks and mortar or wood and stone. This is a 'house' in the sense of a heritage, a lineage, a descent through countless generations. David won't live to see it, but just as God promised Abraham that he would be the ancestor of a multitude of nations, so he now promises David that his name too will live for ever. And a thousand years later, somewhere in the little town of Nazareth, an angel appears to a young woman to tell her that the promise is now to be fulfilled, through her. 'You will bear a son and call him Jesus....and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David.'

There must have been a moment – one of those moments that seem to go on for ever – when Gabriel had finished speaking. Angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven held their breath. There was a choice. Abraham could have refused to sacrifice Isaac. Elijah could have given up and died in the desert. There had been so many choices leading to this critical point, and now the whole future depended on one very young village woman. Mary hesitated for a moment, wanting an explanation for something that was clearly not possible – 'but nothing is impossible with God', the angel assured her. And so, in those timeless words, she agreed. 'Here am I, your servant, let it be with me according to your word.'

That, too, was a promise, of complete surrender to God. It is quite staggering. Just think about promises – commitments - you have made, and that others have made to you. How often are they broken, even the ones we make most solemnly and with the best intentions of keeping? How often do we find that change somehow absolves us of a promise, no matter how sincerely made? Even that long-term promise to love and be faithful to a partner can become impossible to maintain. And the one made before sleep, or before an anaesthetic: 'Into your hands, O Lord, I commit my spirit', is made in the expectation that in due course we shall wake and find our spirit still with us. What sort of conviction would it take to be able to promise total obedience, as Mary did?

Yesterday evening I found myself shouting at the TV – something I never do. It was the repeated statement that Christmas has been cancelled. Boris can't cancel Christmas. Even Cromwell didn't cancel Christmas, although most people think he did – it was the Godly Party in the Long Parliament which did its best to ban any sort of celebration. (Just imagine a Godly Party in the House of Commons today.) They banned celebrations at Easter, Ascension

and Pentecost as well, which most people don't realise. Shops and workplaces were to be open as usual, and anyone found celebrating would be punished. These were to be times of strict fasting. In 1644 both houses of parliament sat on Christmas Day, and were treated to lengthy sermons from assorted bishops. Christian observance was a solemn, serious matter; people were to reflect on their sins and seek repentance. Above all, there was to be no merriment. That ban was about as successful as our present government's attempts to prevent people enjoying themselves.

Some of this suddenly sounds alarmingly familiar. Christmas will be very different this year, and for many people it will be very difficult. But we are on the brink of something tremendous – a vaccine which should help us gradually get back to something more like normal life, and for which we thank God for the inspiration and determination given to so many scientists and medical researchers. We are on the brink of something else tremendous too, for which we also thank God: the fulfilment of his promise to Abraham, Moses, David and Mary, and through them to us. Maybe a pared-down, simpler Christmas will give us more time to wonder and rejoice at Mary's obedience, worship the Christ-child and sing (in our hearts, if not behind our masks) with the angels.