



# *Christ Church Cathedral*

## OXFORD

**19 July 2020: Matins Sermon**

**The Sixth Sunday after Trinity**

**Deuteronomy 30:1–10, 1 Peter 3:8–18**

**The Revd Canon Graham Ward, Regius Professor of Divinity**

**‘Living on Promise’**

On the edge of the Promised land, having traversed and circled the wilderness for decades, the Israelites arrive at the river Jordan and stare into their future. None of them had ever known this land, even Moses who had led them there did not know this land, and he would never cross the river but die on its far side. The land stretched out before them was a land of myth and legend, of stories passed down through the generations as they slaved in Egypt; passed down round cooking pots and camp fires. But it was a vision of this land that had driven them on; some memory they had no personal memories of. And here it lay before them. Throughout that time of endless meandering its location was concealed, wrapped in rumours of milk and honey, vineyards and olive groves, melons and cucumbers. It was the land of their great-grandmothers and fathers down through centuries that separated them from their forebears Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Rachel and Leah. And somewhere deep in that past was Abraham, himself a sojourner, himself a wanderer out of Ur of the Chaldees and Haran. Did they line up along the line of hills, the heights of Moab, what are now Syria and Jordan? Did they think, “This now is our homeland, our patrimony”? The valley north of the Dead Sea was probably lusher then than it is today. Or did they look down across the plain and see the ancient city of Jericho, the heavily fortified city, and think: “The land is already occupied”? Nevertheless, it is here that God spoke to them, through Moses, the words later recorded in the *Book of Deuteronomy* some of which we heard in our first lesson this morning. These words follow immediately after them: Behold, this land “is not hidden from you, neither is it far off. It is not set in heaven so that you should say ‘Who will go up for us and bring it down’... Neither is it beyond the sea that you should say Who shall cross the sea and bring it to us.” The land is here before your eyes and “I have set before you today a choice: either life and good or death and evil” (Deut.30.11-15). But what they saw, though beautiful, was a land already occupied. So, in the place of the fulfilment of a promise that has held them fast down through the years, God says “the word is very nigh to you, it is in your mouth and in your heart,

that you may do it” (Deut.30.14). So, they live still with promise and what in Deuteronomy 29.1 is described as “the words of the covenant.”

I want to speak this morning of living on promise; for that is what faith is – the faith that sustains hope. In our second lesson from the first *Letter of Peter*, we are told to be “ready at all times to give an answer to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you.” I say this because it is faith and hope that will be called upon in the days ahead. Compared to the restrictions of lockdown, the summer may look lush as the shops reopen, as the geraniums, stocks and larkspur flower, and we can walk again in the open country. Some even may be able to go on holiday. But the aftermath of this pandemic is going to be frightful. Indeed, many are already locked into new prisons of debt and unemployment. There are high levels of anxiety and fear behind the masks. There are intensities of trauma still to be worked through. There are broken and fractured relationships that will need negotiation and maybe reconciliation. And there is much grief because loved ones had to be dispatched without much or any ceremony; they still are in many parts of the world yet to experience the peak of this virus’ devastation. The days ahead are full of unknowns, and I don’t see that the coming months or even years are going to be easy. Living on promise requires endurance; it requires living beyond oneself and one’s own resources.

But the beating heart of God’s promise is a vision – of faithfulness and love that desires wellbeing; the wellbeing of everyone, not just Christians. The vision is of abundance and liberality. At a small gathering of friends for a bring and share in my garden last Sunday, the table was laden, the sparkling wine flowed and the laughter rippled. It was a celebration. We hadn’t seen each other to talk to in over three months. But I return to God’s words to Israel on the edge of the Promised Land: “the word is very nigh to you, it is in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it” That you may do it. We have a hope, as Peter writes, that wells up because its source lies in the goodness and faithfulness of God. That hope constitutes a testimony; it bears witness before our friends and neighbours to the God who is our God, the God for us. And wellbeing overflows; its generosity expands into doing and acting. If we have been fortunate during this awful time, then to whom much is given much will be demanded. The celebrations are good, very good; they are expressions of new-found freedoms. And they must feed and enflame beyond ourselves in all the liberality of God’s love. In the days ahead the expenditure of much love will be needed. But, on promise, we live. Deuteronomy 30.16: “I command you this day to love the Lord your God, to walk in God’s ways... that you may live and multiply. And the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering.” The way ahead is riddled with unknowns, but we are not those without hope, and God has promised to keep us.