

2024 Theme: CHOSEN TO BE HOLY – TRANSFORMATION BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

February Theme: I HAVE CHOSEN YOU – TRUSTING GOD’S PROMISES

Text of talk given at ADoRE by Mary Hirst 24th February 2024

Hello, thank you for having me with you this morning. Perhaps it is also helpful to know that I am married, that I’ve worked as part of a school chaplaincy and also as a scriptwriter for a charity that tries to protect religious freedom around the world. I am a Lay Benedictine, which means that I try and live by the values and way of following Christ that St Benedict puts forward in his Rule. I am a promised member of a community called the Manquehue Apostolic Movement. I spent a total of three years living in a Manquehue Community, some of that time in Chile, in the capital and then in Patagonia and I spent two years living in a Manquehue Community at Downside School in Somerset. I mention this for two reasons: the charism, way of life and most of all the friendship, has helped me understand and live each day the truth that I am chosen by God, that I am His beloved daughter and because of that I can and absolutely should trust His promises. Secondly it was while living in community that I experienced a particular outpouring of the Holy Spirit that I may mention later.

Enough about me. Over to Him!

What a wonderful title for a talk, “I Have Chosen You”, Trusting in God’s Promises. How more wonderful that we are thinking and praying on this during Lent. It’s during Lent that the Church takes us through the Book of Exodus, journeying with the Chosen People of God. That journey, from slavery in Egypt, being freed with signs and wonders from God, through forty years of wandering in the desert which meant relying on the Lord and returning to His faithfulness again and again arriving finally to the Promised Land – that journey is ours too.

I take the journey of the Israelites and the way that God acts towards and amongst them because it is a history that is not confined to those pages, to that time, but it is our reality too: *We* are the chosen people of God – *I am chosen*, He leads us through deserts in order to really show us by signs and wonders that He is our God and that He is faithful to His promises and this is journey with a purpose – not a fruitless wandering but a journey towards Him that every single day, every moment draws us closer to Him regardless of what it may *feel* like.

We can dive into the Scriptures with the Holy Spirit – the same Spirit who inspired them - that same person, the Holy Spirit, today opens us up to hear the Word of the Lord, to hear the voice of Christ speaking – sometimes declaring, at others times whispering intimately - those very same promises to us today in our hearts and in our lives.

We live and walk the journey filled with the Holy Spirit. He was given to us at our baptism and “Now you too, in him, have heard the message of the truth and the gospel of your salvation, and having put your trust in it you have been stamped with the seal of the Holy Spirit of the Promise.” Eph 1:13

He helps us to trust, lifting our feet when we can't take another step. “And as well as this, the Spirit too comes to help us in our weakness, for, when we do not know how to pray properly, then Spirit personally makes our petitions for us in groans that cannot be put into words.” When we can't walk, can't pray, can't say yes to God, can't dare to believe what He might be offering me or be telling me about how much I am worth, the Holy Spirit does that for us, “For in him is found the Yes to all God's promises ^land therefore it is ‘through him’ that we answer ‘Amen’ ^m to give praise to God. It is God who gives us, with you, a sure place in Christ and has both anointed us and marked us with his seal ⁿ giving us as a pledge the Spirit in our hearts.” He is that yes. How wonderful is that?

We journey, you and I, as God's chosen and beloved ones. He offers us deliverance and freedom from all that enslaves us today – my phone, my computer, my addictions, my lethargy, my fears, my suffering – He promises us freedom and He makes it happen. The pillar of cloud that showed the Israelites the way and the pillar of fire that gave them light in the darkness. This He offers to you. To me. He does not leave us alone.

Lent can feel like a desert – daunting, long, the Liturgy is stripped back, we feel the barrenness, we've given up things, taken other things on – why?

In the prophet Hosea the Lord says “But look, I am going to seduce her and lead her into the desert and speak to her heart.” Ho 2:16

He draws us to the desert, away from everything, to speak to our hearts – to our inmost self. That part of ourselves that no one knows, that part which we may know something of but which really comes alive when He speaks to us. We discover more of ourselves when we know and listen to Him. When we let ourselves be known by Him. And that is why we are in the desert, so that He can speak to our hearts and prepare to embrace Him again at Easter, not only to embrace Him but to live the Passion with Him and enter into new life.

It was in the desert that the Israelites, God's Chosen People, learnt to live by God's promises. Learnt to trust that He really means what He says. In Isaiah 55 He says, “For, as the rain and the snow come down from the sky and do not return before having watered the earth, fertilising and making it germinate to provide seed for the sower and food to eat, so it is with the word that goes from my mouth: it will not return to me unfulfilled or before having carried out my good pleasure and having achieved what it was sent to do.” Is 55:10-11

He means what He says and when He speaks things happen. Look at creation. Look at me. Look at You. (I suppose being online means we can actually do that!)

I hope I have set the scene a little bit to where God is speaking to us this morning. We are in Lent, a sort of desert where we can't hide from things and where temptations are perhaps louder or more obvious – not so hidden – as other times. It is in this place that we can really listen.

I want to do three things with you: I want to invite you to bask in this chosenness – to really embrace the fact that the Lord has chosen you. Then I want to spend some time pondering what His promises are to me personally. Then we are going to look at the Trusting part.

I invite you to listen to what the Lord says to you as you ponder His Word for a moment: “Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name, you are mine.” Isaiah 43:1

How do I hear these words? What does it mean for me to hear them today, this morning? What do I discover about Him who speaks these words?

I wish I could ask people to share the characteristics they found in pondering what this verse tells us about God but I can't easily so I will share a few of my own thoughts but add your own to mine. Strong. Almighty. Embracing me. Saviour. Knows me. Powerful. Shepherd. Has a voice. Loves me.

This is the 'I' who speaks to us. Who calls us by name. He is those things and so, so much more. It is because He is these things that we can trust Him. “He who has called you is trustworthy and will carry it out.” 1 Th 5:24 That we can dare to believe that we might be chosen and that we might be able to live by His promises.

What does it mean to be chosen?

It means that we are invited into friendship with God. When God chooses us He invites us into friendship with Him. We see that in the Old Testament –The Lord in Isaiah describes Abraham as ‘my friend’ isn't that wonderful? “But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, descendant of Abraham my friend.” The letter of James tells us “Abraham put his faith in God, and this was considered as making him upright; and he received the name ‘friend of God’

In the Book of Exodus we hear, “The Lord would talk to Moses face to face, as a man talks to his friend,”

In the Gospels we SEE Jesus' friendship and we hear him to say to his disciples, “*You are my friends*, if you do what I command you. I shall no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business; *I call you friends because I have made*

known to you everything I have learnt from my Father. You did not choose me, no I chose you..."

"You did not choose me, no I chose you." Earlier I mentioned that I am a promised member of Manquehue... I thought I was choosing them, that I was making a promise but in reality that was flipped around – In making my promise I felt powerfully that they were making a promise to me – of friendship. I was being welcomed into this family God was giving me something much greater than I had imagined or perhaps even thought possible. Most of this community is in Chile so I really live on the knowledge and truth that in Christ there is no division, no distance but that we are One in Him. Ga 3:28 "There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither slave nor freeman, there can be neither male nor female – for you all one in Christ Jesus."

"True to your word, support me and I shall live; do not disappoint me of my hope."
Ps119:116

"Receive me, O Lord, in accordance with your word and I shall live, and do not disappoint me in the hope you have given me." RB 58:21

I thought I was making a promise, that I was committing and that I was going to work hard at it. In reality what my promise means to me, or how I have come to understand it, is that every day, through it, God is making and renewing His promise to me. Of friendship. Of unwavering love. No matter how much I waver, no matter how much I wander. Like those Israelites in the desert – I often wander, I sometimes doubt, I sometimes want to put my faith in other things. But every day He is faithful.

What the Lord asks of His friends is faith – to trust in His promises.

"It was by faith that Abraham obeyed the call to set out for a country that was the inheritance given to him and his descendants, and that he set out without knowing where he was going. By faith he sojourned in the Promised Land as though it were not his... It was equally by faith that Sarah, in spite of being past the age, was made able to conceive, because she believed that he who had made the promise was faithful to it."
Hebrews 11

"Counting on the promise of God, he did not doubt or disbelieve, but drew strength from faith and gave glory to God fully convinced that whatever God promised he has the power to perform" Rm 4:21

In the Gospel of Luke, he tells us that this is the way that Mary lived. Elizabeth says to Mary, "Yes blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled." Lk 1:45 She trusted in God's promise and look how the history of humankind changed because she trusted.

(Josh 21:45) *Of all the promises that the Lord had made to the House of Israel, not one failed; all were fulfilled.*

(Prov 3:5-6) *Trust wholeheartedly in the Lord, put no faith in your own perception; acknowledge him in every course you take and he will see that your paths are smooth.*

I want to invite you to pause now for a moment and we're going to ask the Lord what He is promising us today.

First, let us ask for the gift of faith to be able to ask Him that question and the faith to listen and believe what He says to your heart.

And don't worry if the answer is silence. Rest in His presence, allow the Holy Spirit to pray in you, trusting in the promise that the Spirit will pray in you. Trusting in the promise that the Lord is with you in friendship. Sometimes we spend time in silence with our friends. That is wonderful. He may answer you later.

Lord what are you promising me? What promises have you made me that I don't dare to believe in or that I have let pass me by?

I want to invite you to say 'Amen' to each of those promises. As we heard before: "For in him is found the Yes to all God's promises and therefore it is 'through him' that we answer 'Amen' to give praise to God." *Amen* means 'that which is solid, trustworthy'; it is the reply of human faithfulness to God's faithfulness in Jesus Christ.

What does it mean for me when I trust God's promises? When I say yes to them? When I say yes to Him?

It means more than you can dream or imagine. It is also probably different to what one dreams or imagines. And that is the adventure, the trusting wholeheartedly in this person who knows us better than we know ourselves and who has a plan for us.

For me, this talk is particularly poignant today, at this time in my life. The Lord has been asking me to wait. Not to apply to any old job but to wait for Him. This has been VERY challenging! Since September I have been discerning and praying, waiting for whatever He might have in store. I have been tempted to rush into jobs but felt steadied by Him who has told me, "I have a purpose for you." During this last week, I have come to understand that He means this time not as a time of waiting but actually as a time of preparation, that He is equipping me for something. But wow it has been hard to trust in Him, each Monday when I still don't have a job and my lovely husband is providing for us both, it feels silly and foolish to be waiting around. For what exactly? Paul's words about being a fool for Christ have been very pertinent to me!

Why am I trusting? Because I know Him who makes the promise. I know Him. And He has never ever let me down and when I turn to the Scriptures I see that again and again and again He fulfils and even surpasses what He promises in His mercy and His love. So

every day, perhaps more than ever I come to Him and I try to do the things that are in front of me. When I mentioned earlier about the Holy Spirit helping us when we can't lift our feet another step, I say that because I know it. Each day He draws me to come back to the Father and to rest in Him, to dash the thoughts that bring me down against the rock that is Christ – that's how St Benedict expresses it and I find it helpful!

So trusting in God's promises means that I live as God's child. It means that I depend on Him and not on me and my criteria. It doesn't mean doing nothing, but it means that I am allowing myself to be transformed.

The word promise is full of potential; it is full of hope. When I live my life like that then I am open to the enormity of God. To the abundance of His love and the reality that My ways are not your ways, My thoughts are not your thoughts. Isaiah 65:17 "For look I am going to create new heavens and a new earth..."

When we trust in God's promises, when we believe the truth that we are chosen and all the implications that come with that, it has an impact on others/it has implications for others. Often in ways that we do not realise but it is very powerful. Think about the very early Church, stamped with the seal of the Promise, the Holy Spirit, a tiny Church that grew and grew and changed the world around them. When we live by God's promises we build the Church. This call to say yes to Him is bigger than ourselves, we almost have a duty, a mission, to say yes wholeheartedly and, as St John Paul the Second said, to open wide the doors to Christ."

When we trust, even in the small things, we allow God's will to work in us and that has implications for those around us. God's promise is that the kingdom is very near to you – repent and believe the good news. Do I believe in that kingdom? Where God reigns

Some practical ideas about trusting God's promises – how do I do that? Prayer – turning often to the one who makes those promises to me. Discovering again and again what He is like and dispelling the idols that creep in, the false ideas of God and the lies from the father of lies who likes to tell us that God isn't faithful, that God wouldn't promise things like that to you... Prayer. Asking the Holy Spirit again and again.

Praying God's promises.

Writing them down. Writing down signs of God's love for you – small and big – He is often revealing His promises in ways that we aren't expecting. Write down the signs of His love and then go back to them when things are tricky and dark and you can't quite see the way forward. Remembering that He means what He says.

Meeting with others who also live, or trying to live by His promises. Community. We can't do it alone but better than that – He doesn't want us to do it alone! He gives us the Church, this community founded on the rock that is Him. I'm not talking about

institutions here, I am talking about the living church that is built on Him. Some people will have celebrated the feast of the Chair of St Peter on Thursday. I've never taken much notice of the feast before but this year I was hit, really struck, by how Peter's yes has meant my yes. Thank you Lord that he trusted You. Again and again and again.

I just want to finish with these verses:

“Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name, you are mine.” Isaiah 43:1

and from Deuteronomy:

“Remember the long road by which the Lord your God led you for forty years in the desert, to humble you, to test you and know your inmost heart – whether you would keep his commandments or not. He humbled you, he made you feel hunger, he fed you with manna which neither you nor your ancestors had ever known to make you understand that human beings live not on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet were not swollen, all those forty years.” DT 8:2-6