

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

NEW TESTAMENT

18th January 2015

Genesis 17:1-8
Galatians 3:23-4:7

This week some of us have begun our undertaking to read the entire New Testament through in about eight weeks, reading it in more or less, as far as we can tell, the order in which its parts were written. It is an adventure and already I am enjoying it. Over these weeks the themes of our worship will come out of what we are reading that week. But this week I thought we should think about what it means that we call this part of our Scripture the New Testament.

Testament is not a word that is often used these days. You mainly come across it in the context of “the Last Will and Testament of...” so if you have made you will – and if not why not? (says she who has yet to do this) – you will have seen the word in this context. Now Will and Testament are not quite two words for the same thing, and though they are both used to describe your final intentions, they do so in different ways. The word Will says that this is what you want, it is your desire that these instructions be carried out, that your home goes to your elder child, maybe, or your stuffed polar bear which is such an inconvenience around the house, to your least favourite aunt. That is what you want to happen. The word Testament is in some ways the more powerful word. It is the legal word that says that this document is the one that testifies to your will. This document has a force which other documents do not. If your aunt brings a letter in which you say that you doubt she would appreciate the stuffed Polar Bear, that has not got the same weight under law as this Will and Testament of yours which foists it upon her. If your second cousin twice removed says that you once said to him that the polar bear would be his, that has no weight at all compared to this will (though your aunt might be glad to pass it on to him!).

And so when we put this in the context of talking about Scripture, the New Testament is the new documentation, the new set of writings that bears official witness to God's intentions for – well, for whom?

The Old Testament, the old writings bear official witness to God's intentions to Abraham and his offspring. As we read earlier, God promised to make Abraham the father of a multitude of nations. He promised to be their God and he promised them a place to live. The rest of the chapter which we didn't read set out their side of the bargain; that they would keep the covenant, showing their allegiance with the outward act of circumcision. Later their way of keeping their side of the agreement was set out in the Law of Moses. That was the Old Testament, the old agreement. By the way, there are Christians nowadays who don't like to refer to the first two thirds of the Bible as the Old Testament, and prefer to call it the Hebrew Scriptures. The idea is that it is more respectful to those of the Jewish faith, and maybe it is. But the “old” in Old Testament does not mean worthless, no longer necessary. It means the former testament, and we need it if only to show us the wonders, the great improvements of the new Testament, the new

Covenant with God under which we now live. Call it Hebrew Scriptures in ecumenical dialogue, I would say, but let's not forget that for the Christian the Old Testament is just that; it is the former and earlier model, to be kept and revered for what it shows and teaches, and to point up the wonders of the New.

St. Paul, who never seems to write simply when he can be complicated, refers to it in terms of being a babysitter. He actually uses the word "slave" but he has in mind a domestic situation which does not occur nowadays. He has in mind the task of the upper house-slave who was given responsibility for the children of the Master. This slave would look after them, take them to school and back again – sometimes give them lessons himself, if he were able – stay with them in their play to keep them safe. The nearest thing that some few families have today is the Au Pair, though of course the Au Pair gets time off! But for most of us the nearest equivalent that we will have experience of is the Babysitter.

I began babysitting when I was twelve, watching my neighbour's three girls when she had to go out for an hour or so. Later I was on the official babysitting list for the tourist office in St. Andrews. Complete strangers would go in and ask for a baby sitter and I would find myself spending an evening in a hotel or guest house, or in a house rented for a holiday, looking after children I had never met! By then I was about fifteen. I don't think that tourist offices offer this sort of service nowadays. I don't remember that I even had to give references! The thing about babysitting is that it is easy and all goes well when the child does not try to push the boundaries. When the baby is asleep it is really easy. When the child is happy to eat what is provided and play quiet games there are no problems. I used to babysit for Dr. Peter Buchan, who you all know, and when his son would not sleep, I used to set him arithmetical problems to keep him from getting fractious! But what if the child is really ill, or what if the child runs away? What if the child says "I won't go to bed" and makes life difficult? Babysitting is not always easy money!

And it was in situations like that that the Old Testament way of relating to God fell down. The Old agreement God had was that he would be God for Abraham and his offspring, and that they would acknowledge him as God which meant living in obedience to his word. And when they did it worked out well. But when they did not, there was no alternative but to call the Testament broken, and for God to withdraw from his people – sending them into exile, allowing difficult times to come upon them, and testing their resolve to follow his ways and take him as their God. And so Paul says that "The law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith" or by faithfulness.

Basically what he is saying in the complicated sentences we read from him this morning, is that the faithfulness of Jesus to living God's way and doing God's will shows that here is a mature Israelite, one who has grown up and no longer needs the babysitter to hedge him around and take care of him. He will choose to do the right thing, to live close to God and he will stick by his resolve faithfully. He has come to bring God's promises to fulfilment. The answering faith, or faithfulness which his faithfulness stimulates in us shows that we too are, in Jesus, complete, trusted members of God's family.

To take another analogy. The Old Testament and the Law it contains is like a boarding school. It is like a good school with lots of freedom, with interesting things to do, good people to be with, excellent care shown to the pupils and very varied and extensive grounds which you are free to explore. But you mustn't try to go outside the grounds. But with the coming of Jesus, and especially with his faithfulness to death and then his resurrection the gates of the school grounds

are opened wide. The children have graduated and leave school to take all that they have learned and apply it within the wide world.

God is still God, the same God who made that testament with Abraham. We are still ourselves, capable of not acting maturely, or not being faithful. But Jesus' coming, and his life, death and resurrection has changed everything.

For one thing, before we were like wards of state. We were like under-age inheritors of wealth or property, who cannot manage their property until they come of age. Like orphans whose family inheritance is kept for them but kept from them by legally appointed guardians. But now we are adopted as children of God, full members of his family. We are not kept segregated. Now we can freely mingle in the world and can discover that all kinds of people are adopted as God's children – remember God promised that Abraham would be the father of many nations, and that promise still stands. It came true physically in the birth and growth of the Arab nations. It has come true in even greater variety as all nations are invited and adopted into Christ's church. And so the New Testament bears witness to an agreement or covenant made with all who respond to the faithfulness of Jesus with faith.

There are people who look like us and many who do not. There are people who express the faith in the same way that we do, and many who do not. There are people of all ages, many lifestyles, both genders, and so long as we say and mean “Jesus is Lord” then we are adopted and set free within the family. This is the story of the New Testament. This is the story in which we live, and it is a very liberating story to be a part of.

Many of us are reading the story of the New Testament over these weeks. The story of the New Testament and the story contained within it are one and the same and it is a story which has yet to reach its conclusion. The word Testament means the document which testifies to a will or intent. The New Testament testifies, gives official witness to God's will or intent for us because of Jesus. The other word that is used is Covenant, and it was with his disciples, at their last supper before his crucifixion that Jesus took the cup and said that it symbolised the new covenant sealed by his blood. We remember that every time we take communion. We remember that we live within God's new Covenant or within the New Testament because of Jesus death and resurrection. That was when the Old gave way for the New. That was the decisive difference in the way God chose to deal with the world.

As we read the New Testament, it is not a bad idea to think to yourself about what makes this Testament good for you. This document, this series of documents, which testify to God's will for us, what makes it good for you, and how does it call you to live in response? Amen.