

Baptism of Rhys and Esme Ross-Starkie

St. Brandon's

Isaiah 58: 9-14; Luke 13: 10-17

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The people who decided, years ago, what the set readings for today would be, apparently didn't know that Rhys and Esme were to be baptised. Otherwise, they might have chosen rather more appropriate readings! But having said that, the OT reading from Isaiah is actually quite appropriate – or, at least, it's possible to make a connection from what was written around 2,500 years ago to what is about to happen in the baptism part of the service in a few minutes without, I think, forcing it too much.

What the prophet Isaiah was doing was, in a sense, spelling out the terms of a covenant. Now we don't use that word much these days, though you may have come across it in a legal document. But it signifies rather more than a legal contract might because the most important thing about it is that it is founded on a *relationship* between two people or, in Isaiah's case, between God and the people of Israel. And it's a relationship that's based on love. So the covenant which Isaiah was spelling out was to do with what each side needed to do to maintain that relationship of love.

And that's pretty close to what happens in baptism. Today is about Rhys and Esme entering into a covenant relationship with God, a relationship of love. And two things we can be sure of right from the start is that God will always keep His side of the covenant relationship, and that Rhys and Esme will find it difficult, but not impossible, to keep theirs. One of the psalms says that God is "ever mindful of his covenant" and that "he has commanded his covenant for ever" (Ps. 111: 5, 9). God will never let us down in this life or the next, whatever we may or may not do.

And Isaiah also gives us some ideas as to what the two parties to the covenant are committing to. It starts with God's side of the covenant. "You shall call, and the Lord *will* answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, *Here I am.*" And what that is saying is that in all the circumstances of our lives, including those in which we need help, God will be there, God will answer, God will be with us. And it continues, "The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong." And while that may not be all that clear, what it seems to be saying is that we have very powerful promises from God that He will be with us, guiding us continually – not just occasionally or when His fancy takes it, but all the time. And, recognising that life isn't always a bed of roses, but for all of us including Rhys and Esme is very likely to involve being in some parched places at times – in other words places where there is no refreshment and life seems dry and hard – God is saying that He will not abandon us there but will be with us and strengthen us so that we can face whatever it is that life throws at us.

So these are very comforting reassurances from God, and if you want it in one short phrase it's simply saying, "God loves you and is for you". Rhys and Esme, God loves you and is for you.

But what about our side of the covenant? What do we have to do to keep the relationship intact? Well again the language Isaiah uses isn't always easy, but we can get the gist of what he's saying. "Remove the yoke from among you" probably means don't exploit other people.¹ "Remove the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil" means don't judge others. "Offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted" is straightforward – look after those in your community who are badly off. So all of that is about our relationships with what elsewhere Jesus would refer to as our neighbours. So, again, if you want it in one short phrase it's simply, "love your neighbour."

¹ The first part of the chapter reinforces this point.

But then it goes on to say “Refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your interests on my holy day.” And while this is obviously directed towards what we might do on Sundays, I think it is much broader than that. It is about our relationship with God in general and about honouring God in our lives. And one of the ways we can do that is by keeping Sunday special, and coming to church to worship God and learn more about Him is one way of doing that.

But the general point is that if we are to be in a relationship with God then we need to nurture that relationship. So if you want this in one short phrase it’s simply, “love the Lord your God.”

So here’s the summary of the covenant relationship: God loves you and is for you. And in return He asks us to love our neighbour and to love Him. Rhys and Esme, God loves you and is for you; that’s His side of the covenant relationship. Grow up to love your neighbour and to love God; that’s your side of the covenant relationship.

And the passage then offers some lovely pictures of what it will be like for us if this covenant relationship is maintained. Let me mention just one of them, though there are more. “You shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.” That’s a lovely image of health and well-being, of someone who is clearly flourishing just as a garden flourishes when it’s well watered.

Now it’s important to say that this is not what is sometimes known as a prosperity gospel – that, if you keep in with God, your life will be full of health and wealth. We’ve already seen that there may be parched places in our lives. But it is a promise of flourishing even in adversity, of God never letting us down, always being there for us, and always seeking to give us life in all its fullness.

So, Rhys and Esme, as you come to be baptised, this is the covenant relationship with God which you are entering into. You can be sure that God will keep His side of the covenant. And with the help of others, particularly your parents and God-parents, and including God Himself by His Holy Spirit, may you be enabled to keep your side of it.

Amen