

REFORMED CHURCH BELLVILLE. MORNING SERVICE. 31 JULY 2011

Sing before: Psalm 89:2

Our help is in the Name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. Beloved, grace and peace be with you from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ through the mighty working of God the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Song of praise, Psalm 98:1+2

Confession of faith: Nicene Creed.

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the father before all ages; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made. Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and on the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the living and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life; who proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.

We believe one holy and catholic (universal) and apostolic church. We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

Amen.

After the reading of the Law we sing Hymn 9-1:1+10+11 (former Hymn 26)

Reading of the Law.

Hymn 9-1:1+10+11.

Prayer.

Psalm 105:4+5

Scripture reading: Genesis 15: 1-21.

Text: Genesis 15: 17-18:

“When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking brazier with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said: ‘To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates – ...”

Theme of sermon: In His covenant God gives Himself completely to His people.

Beloved in our Lord Jesus Christ, we, adults, know what it means to conclude an agreement or contract with another. Nowadays we deal with contracts when buying a house or a motor car. Or, closer to most of us, are probably the contracts we conclude with the servant who works in our

house or the gardener who does our garden. In such a contract it is usually stipulated what you as employer expect of the servant or gardener and what you undertake to pay the servant or gardener and arrangements for leave.

When the servant or gardener signs the contract he or she thereby promises formally to do what the employer expects of them. Likewise the employer with his signature formally promises the servant or gardener to pay the remuneration and grant the leave as stipulated. Such a contract is binding for the period as agreed between the parties to the contract. Should the employee or the employer fail to perform as expressly promised in the contract it would be a breach of the contract and the other party could issue summons.

In Genesis 15 the Holy Spirit tells us of a covenant the LORD our God made with Abram the father of all believers. To some extent a covenant is similar to a contract. And in the Bible we read in a number of places of covenants being made between people. But this covenant that God made with Abram is not a contract. This is not simply a case of promises being made about what God will do for Abram and what Abram will do for the LORD. When God makes His covenant He gives much more than what Abram even expected!

Whether the events described from verse 7 onwards occurred immediately after what occurred up to verse 6, is not clear. But it makes no difference whether this occurred the same day or some time later. When the LORD brought Abram out of UR the promise of offspring and a land was already made. The LORD now confirms to Abram with a sign that his offspring will indeed be incalculable and that his heir will be a son out of him.

But the LORD does not stop there. He knows that Abram is worried not only about the promised offspring and is losing faith. Abram's descendants also need a place to stay. And Abram has been living about eight or nine years as a stranger in a tent in this land that the LORD promised would be given to him and his descendants. Abrams sojourn in Canaan is secured only by the agreement concluded between him and the three Amorite brothers, Mamre, Eshcol and Aner. This treaty with the Amorites is not sufficient for Abram. Mamre, Eshcol and Aner are people and, on top of that, heathens. They could change their minds and break the treaty. Or their offspring could say later that they know nothing of the treaty with Abram and where would Abram's offspring then find a place? Considered in this light we can understand Abram's worry which is expressed in his words about the land.

But the LORD wants to remove all doubt about the promises of descendants and a land from Abram so that he may exercise himself in the pure faith. There may not be the slightest wisp of doubt about what the LORD promises his children. That is why the LORD continues to speak to him about the promised land. The LORD said to Abram: "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it." Abram hears that the LORD who now confirms the promise, is the same LORD who called him from his country of birth. The LORD has been working with Abram personally for the past eight or nine years. And this is also the third time that the LORD tells him that He gives him this land although presently it is occupied by other people.

When Abram heard the first time that the LORD gives him this land he built an altar at Shechem and called on the Name of the LORD. Abram as it were claimed the land for the LORD. After Lot had parted from Abram the LORD told him a second time that He gives him the land. Again Abram built an altar to the LORD, this time at Hebron in the South. Now, for the third time, the LORD makes this promise that Abram shall receive from the LORD this land as his to possess.

But this time Abram does not build an altar – he asks: “O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I shall gain possession of it?”

Abram does not doubt the word of the LORD. Through the powerful working of the Holy Spirit Abram believes in the LORD and knows that the LORD is trustworthy. Abram poses the question because he seeks a sign to seal his faith in the LORD and His word. Beloved, we must understand Abram’s request for a sign. Based on, and because of, the promise the LORD made to Abram that he would possess the land, he prays the LORD to give him something concrete to assure him of God’s promise.

Abram believed in the LORD. He now requests a sign to strengthen and to seal this belief in God. We, too, have received signs from the Lord our God to seal and strengthen our faith in Him. The sign of water at baptism and the signs of wine and bread at Holy Communion are the signs the Lord gave to strengthen and seal our faith in Jesus Christ. These are signs from the Lord’s hand so that we may understand better the promises of forgiveness of sin, being God’s child and the eternal life. God does not wish there to be any doubt about His promises with His children. That is why He makes His promises not in words to be heard only, but He also gives us signs to show and seal His words to us.

The LORD does not immediately answer Abram’s question. He commands him to bring a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon. Abram obeys and deals with the animals as commanded by the LORD. He cuts them in two and places each half opposite the other. The birds he put whole with the pieces of meat.

Brothers, sisters and children, that what he had to do with the animals was well known to Abram. In the world in which Abram lived that was the way in which people made treaties with one another. An animal was slaughtered and cut in two. Thereafter they pronounced the words of their mutual agreement - each one said what he undertook towards the other. Thereafter they walked together between the two halves of the slaughtered animal. This walking was the confirmation of the treaty, as is the signature we put to a contract confirming that we shall do what is written above.

But in Abram’s time the walking between the two halves also carried a warning for the two parties. With the walk he says that, should one of them break the treaty, he will be dealt with as the animal was. He will be killed and cut up. This probably passed through Abram’s mind as he prepared the animals, this being the way in which men made treaties. What the LORD wished to do he did not exactly know.

Although Abram did not know what God had in mind, he nevertheless did not allow the birds of prey to eat of the carcasses. The LORD had commanded him to prepare the animals in this way and he therefore had to protect them so that the LORD could use them as He wished. The sign Abram had requested does not come immediately. During the day trials await him - the birds of prey that come to devour the carcasses. But it is in this waiting for the LORD’S revelation that Abram exercises the pure belief. He learns to await the LORD trustingly. When the Lord makes us wait for His answer and Satan assails us with all sorts of temptations while we are waiting, it is not a case of the Lord not answering our prayers. Neither is a matter of the Lord forgetting us. That time of waiting is part of the Lord’s ministry to His children. True believers must also learn to wait on the Lord patiently and to continue to trust in Him. Do not, because the time of waiting has become too long for you, throw everything over board so that the evil birds of prey can eat up all that which the Lord has given you, and given you to do, in your life. Wait patiently, wait trustingly and the Lord will act.

As the sun was setting, the LORD caused Abram to fall into a deep sleep. A dreadful darkness came over him, for the LORD, clothed in His Divine Majesty, bows down into the world of mankind. The LORD then reveals to him that not only he, but his progeny also, shall remain strangers in the land for a long time. Abram is assured once again that he shall have offspring. The suffering of his progeny shall be hard. They will be enslaved and ill-treated in a country not their own. After four hundred years in this country the LORD shall bring them back to this land to possess it. After four hundred years of being strangers the period of grace for Canaan shall come to an end.

After this revelation about his progeny and his own death, the LORD eventually, in the dark of night, gave Abram the sign he had asked for. At this stage Abram must have awoken from his deep sleep, because, when it was dark, he saw a smoking brazier and a blazing torch passing between the pieces of meat. And the Holy Spirit writes: "On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram..."

The smoking brazier and the blazing torch are signs of God's powerful presence. These symbols are meant to engender in mankind a deep awe and holy fear of God. Centuries later when God confirms His covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, we see this again. Then the whole mountain trembles and smokes and while this occurs nobody may touch the mountain. In fact, every Israelite had to be purified and prepared for the moment that God would appear to Moses on the Mount.

But the symbols of a brazier that smokes and a torch that blazes are there not only to inspire in man awe of God. The fact that in these symbols, which He employs to make Himself present with Abram, God Himself moves between the pieces of meat, is to Abram, and to us, a great comfort. God, the almighty Creator and Ruler is willing to make a covenant with people in such a humanly comprehensible fashion. God bows Himself deeply down into the world of his people.

When God makes this covenant with Abram, He does not deal with him on equal footing. God remains God and Abram remains God's creature. That is why only God moves between the pieces of meat. Man does not do so because God wishes to make a covenant with Abram and his progeny. It was not Abram who sought to make a covenant with the LORD. Abram only asked for a sign and God gives His covenant.

Although the LORD is the almighty God who makes a covenant with a creature, it is not done in the way Abram is accustomed to it being done between people. When a mighty king concludes a treaty with a lesser person, the king usually employs his greater power to force the lesser party into the treaty. And the promises made by the king are often rather poor compared to what he requires the lesser party to promise him in the treaty.

When God makes the covenant with Abram He does not compel him with His almight into the covenant and He does not humiliate him into a creature of no account. The promises He makes are also not cheap and slight. No, His Divine love for man is abundant and what He promises is abundant. God takes it upon Himself to give the promised land to Abram's progeny. In response thereto Abram and his progeny must believe in the LORD and obediently serve and love Him. Beloved, we must not make the mistake of thinking that Canaan was the true contents of God's covenant with Abram and his children. If Canaan was the whole contents we would be excluded from the covenant, because we live in South Africa, and not in Canaan. When about fifteen or sixteen years later God again speaks of the covenant with Abram and his children, we read of that in Genesis 17, we learn what the true contents of the covenant is. God says then: "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for

the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.” God Himself, His goodwill and fellowship with mankind is the true contents of the covenant.

When the LORD makes His covenant with Abram and his progeny, the LORD gives Himself to His people. And the LORD does not give poorly or only halfway. He alone gives Himself completely to His people. Remember, Abram did not pass between the pieces of the animals. Only God moved between them. When God passed between the pieces of the animals He did not take upon Him only the burden of giving the promised land to Abram and his children. He also took up the duty of maintaining the covenant between Him and Abram’s faithful progeny. Yes, even the threat of being punished should this covenant be broken, God took upon Himself.

Abram’s progeny, so we see right through the Old Testament, did not always respond with faith and obedience to the grace and love of the LORD. They broke the covenant with their unbelief and yet they appealed to the LORD’s grace and covenanted love. The road of the breaker of the covenant ends in death. And that is not the road of only those who later died in exile. The remnant of Israel that still believed in the LORD also had to walk this road. We, too, deserve to be on this road of death because of our persistent disobedience.

But, Beloved, God took the duties of the covenant upon Himself when He made the covenant. He alone passed between the pieces of meat. Then He already gave Himself completely to His people. And in Jesus Christ we see this occurring. That which God the Father undertook, the Son of God came to perform. He takes our breaking of the covenant upon Himself and in our stead, and in that of all Abram’s faithful progeny He walks the road of death. The debt of the breaking of the covenant is washed from us by the blood of Jesus. And in addition the Father and the Son give us the Holy Spirit to guide us in our restored relationship with God. God does indeed give Himself completely to His people when He makes His covenant with them.

Our almighty God bowed Himself deeply into our world and made His covenant with Abram and his progeny in true human fashion. God confirmed this same covenant with each of us the day of our baptism. In addition the Son of God humiliated Himself into our sinful body to take our breaking of the covenant upon Himself to bring us back into a renewed relationship with God. And all that God wants of you and me is to believe in Him and to love and serve Him with all our heart, soul and all our strength. Can we, and will we, now give ourselves as completely to the LORD?

Amen.

Closing prayer.

Closing song: Psalm 105:22+23.

The Lord bless you and keep you;

The Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you;

The Lord turn His countenance to you and give you peace.

Amen.

Rev C.C.A. Vrey
Reformed Church Bellville.
Sunday 31-07-2011.
Scripture: N I V.