

LAIRG CHURCH OF SCOTLAND & ROGART (ST CALLANS) CHURCH OF SCOTLAND  
SCO20871 and SCO10035

Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> February

**Call to worship**

Here we are Lord, gathered in your name to worship you.

Here we are Lord, gathered on this Lord's Day to encounter you.

Here we are Lord, bringing all our needs, desires and pain – we bring ourselves just as we are. Come amongst us, by your Spirit, O Lord our God. Amen.

**Hymn: Let us build a house where love can dwell**

Let us build a house where love can dwell  
and all can safely live,  
a place where saints and children tell  
how hearts learn to forgive ;  
built of hopes and dreams and visions,  
rock of faith and vault of grace ;  
here the love of Christ shall end divisions :  
*All are welcome,  
all are welcome,  
all are welcome in this place.*

Let us build a house where prophets speak  
and words are strong and true,  
where all God's children dare to seek  
to dream God's reign anew.  
Here the cross shall stand as witness  
and as symbol of God's grace ;  
here as one we claim the faith of Jesus :

Let us build a house where love is found  
in water, wine and wheat :  
a banquet hall on holy ground,

where peace and justice meet.  
Here the love of God, through Jesus,  
is revealed in time and space,  
as we share in Christ the feast that frees us

Let us build a house where hands will reach  
beyond the wood and stone  
to heal and strengthen, serve and teach,  
and live the Word they've known.  
Here the outcast and the stranger  
bear the image of God's face ;  
let us bring an end to fear and danger

Let us build a house where all are named  
Their songs and visions heard  
and loved and treasured, taught and claimed  
as words within the Word.  
Built of tears and cries and laughter,  
prayer of faith and songs of grace,  
let this house proclaim from floor to rafter  
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**Opening Prayers**

Long before the change of name, before the first signs of new life showed the beginnings of promises fulfilled, You asked Abram to make his home among foreigners, and share the blessing that was to come.

And now, O God, you ask the same faith of us: the faith to count ourselves among the least, to find our place alongside the poor and broken; the faith to trust in your mercy and your promises, and to share what we have received; the faith to wait expectantly for your reign of justice and equity, together with those who most need its gifts.

Jesus calls us to deny ourselves. Yet we trust in our own works rather than in God's grace. Jesus calls each of us to take up our cross. Yet rather than allow our selfishness and sin to be put to death, we cling to what we know.

Jesus calls us to follow him. Yet we fear where faith will lead and what it might change in our lives.

In this moment of silence, we confess the sin that separates us from one another and from God.

*Silence for reflection*

People of God, hear this good news. God's covenant with us is true.

God is faithful even when we fail.

Through the Holy Spirit, God gives us the gift of faith and makes us righteous.

Believe in the good news that you are set free to live as children of God.

Amen. Thanks be to God!

**We say together the Lord's Prayer**

**Readings: Genesis 17:1-7,15-16 - The Sign of the Covenant**

17 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. <sup>2</sup> And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." <sup>3</sup> Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, <sup>4</sup> "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. <sup>5</sup> No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. <sup>6</sup> I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. <sup>7</sup> I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

<sup>15</sup> God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. <sup>16</sup> I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

**Romans 4:13-25 God's Promise Realized through Faith**

<sup>13</sup> For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. <sup>14</sup> If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. <sup>15</sup> For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

<sup>16</sup> For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, <sup>17</sup> as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations")—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. <sup>18</sup> Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." <sup>19</sup> He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. <sup>20</sup> No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, <sup>21</sup> being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. <sup>22</sup> Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness." <sup>23</sup> Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, <sup>24</sup> but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, <sup>25</sup> who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

**Reflections on the readings**

The Old Testament readings for Lent this year are encouraging us to think about covenants. Last week we had the covenant with Noah, this week we have Abraham, and next week – let me give you a sneak preview – we get the Ten Commandments.

On a superficial reading, covenants are a good choice for Lent, because they remind us about obligations, about promises made between two parties, about duty. But actually, both the covenant with Noah and the one with Abraham seem to undermine that serious, disciplined note, because it is not until we come on to next week's reading that we start to hear about our side of the bargain.

But as God speaks both to Noah and to Abraham, the duties are all on one side – God's. God promises huge things to both of them, and asks almost nothing in return. In verse 1 of today's reading from Genesis 17, Abraham is told to walk before God 'and be blameless', but there is no suggestion in the promise that follows that the covenant is dependent upon

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Abraham's behaviour. The command to 'walk blameless' is not attached to the promises but to God's statement about himself. 'I am God Almighty. Walk before me and be blameless.' Both Abraham's status and the fulfilment of the promises being made are wholly dependent upon the nature of God, not upon Abraham.

This is certainly the interpretation that Paul puts upon the matter. He is absolutely clear that Abraham does not receive from God because he has kept his side of the bargain and God must do the same. Abraham has not earned the fulfilment of God's promise, and it is not dependent upon him. The promise to Abraham is fulfilled because the one who makes the promise is God, 'who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist' (Romans 4.17). It is the nature of God the giver that guarantees the gift, not the nature or acts of Abraham, the receiver. The only thing Abraham does is to recognize what God is like and trust him to be able to fulfil the promises he makes.

God's covenant with Abraham comes as a series of steps, all of them leading Abraham into a deeper and deeper exploration of the trustworthiness of God. And, of course, he can only test God's trustworthiness by trusting. By the time we come to chapter 17, Abraham has already left his homeland and been through a great many vicissitudes, following God's command, and so far he has more reason to trust than to distrust. He is alive, well and prosperous. But the thing that set Abraham off on this great adventure was actually not a desire for God, or even wealth, but a longing for a son. And although God has been hinting at this all along (see 12:2, 13:16, 15:4), he has yet to deliver on this promise. In fact, by chapter 16 Abraham and Sarah have decided to take matters into their own hands, and bypass God.

This covenant in chapter 17 marks a new phase, which is symbolized by a change of name for both Abraham and Sarah (see 17:5, 15). The journey so far has led them a long way into trusting God, but now they are to see that God is to be trusted beyond their wildest dreams. And just as the covenant with Noah is both a fulfilment of what God promised Noah and a promise for the rest of the world, so is the covenant with Abraham. Abraham and Sarah are to have the child that they long for, but they are also to be 'ancestors of a multitude of nations' in a way that they could never have anticipated. Paul spells it out for us – God's promise to Abraham is a promise to us all.

Lent is a good time for taking small steps in trusting God, and these steps are not about making ourselves feel better or holier, but about allowing ourselves to explore the trustworthiness of God. Sometimes it is difficult to trust in God. We are inclined to get impatient, wanting God to act in our time and in our way. Trusting involves waiting, patiently, remembering that God is not bound by space and time and that revealing his plans to us and keeping his promises may not happen just when, where or in the way that we want. Abraham and Sarah stopped trusting that God would give them a son and took matters into their own hands. But that didn't thwart God's perfect plan. Similarly God's perfect plan for each of us will unfold despite all we do, not because of what we do. Are you willing to keep trusting in God to keep his promises?

**Prayers of intercession**

Let us pray.

God without sin or blemish, ridiculed and reviled for our sake,  
Transform our barrenness into your fruitfulness,  
Turn our despair into hope and faith,  
Bring water to our parched throats, and food to our empty stomachs.

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God without sin or blemish, ridiculed and reviled for our sake  
In times of war and strife in our world, raise your covenant of peace and love;  
In places stalked by hunger and famine, rain down your covenant of abundance.  
For people broken and despairing, whisper your covenant of encouragement.

God without sin or blemish, ridiculed and reviled for our sake  
Where human pride and earthly glory abound, bring your goodness and mercies.  
If our vision is blurred and cloyed, may your blessings endure.  
Where disease and illness have taken root let your healing suffice.  
When our faith is fickle, focus our minds on your steadfastness.

We pray that the poor shall eat and be satisfied, that the rich will be generous in sharing  
your gifts,  
We pray that the mighty rulers of the world shall be humble vessels of your loving justice.  
We pray that the weak and the vulnerable will find their strength and place in your  
kingdom.  
Loving and just God we pray that your holy covenants will be fulfilled beyond these walls  
of worship.  
In the name of the suffering and rejected Christ, Your Son, our Saviour.  
Amen.

**Hymn: I cannot tell why he, whom angels worship**

I cannot tell why He, whom angels worship,  
Should set His love upon the sons of men,  
Or why, as Shepherd, He should seek the  
wand'ers,  
To bring them back, they know not how or  
when.  
But this I know, that He was born of Mary,  
When Beth'hem's manger was His only  
home,  
And that He lived at Nazareth and labored,  
And so the Saviour, Saviour of the world, is  
come.

I cannot tell how silently He suffered,  
As with His peace He graced this place of  
tears,  
Or how His heart upon the Cross was broken,  
The crown of pain to three and thirty years.  
But this I know, He heals the broken-hearted,  
And stays our sin, and calms our lurking fear,  
And lifts the burden from the heavy laden,  
For yet the Saviour, Saviour of the world, is  
here.

I cannot tell how He will win the nations,  
How He will claim His earthly heritage,  
How satisfy the needs and aspirations  
Of east and west, of sinner and of sage.  
But this I know, all flesh shall see His glory,  
And He shall reap the harvest He has sown,  
And some glad day His sun shall shine in  
splendor  
When He the Saviour, Saviour of the world, is  
known.

I cannot tell how all the lands shall worship,  
When, at His bidding, every storm is stilled,  
Or who can say how great the jubilation  
When all the hearts of men with love are  
filled.  
But this I know, the skies will thrill with  
rapture,  
And myriad, myriad human voices sing,  
And earth to heaven, and heaven to earth,  
will answer:  
At last the Saviour, Saviour of the world, is  
King.  
William Young Fullerton

**Blessing**

Go out in peace, and see the world made anew.  
Go out to meet with a community, a family, a society crying out for some love, looking to  
encounter the living God.  
Go out to discover God's Spirit is at work throughout our world, and be transformed by  
your encounter with that same Spirit.  
Go, by the grace of God. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.