**Lawful oaths and vows** dkm June 2022
When was the last time you vowed to do something? A vow is a promise, a solemn promise, accompanied by swearing an oath to someone or something. ‘Men swear by the greater’, and there is no one greater than God (Heb 6:16). While Jesus tells us not to swear at all but to let our ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes’ and our ‘No’, ‘No’, there is a place for vows; the apostle Paul took a vow at Cenchrea (Mat 5:34, Acts 18:18). We must not be swearing in God’s name except in the most solemn of matters. It is sad to hear the President of the United States saying, ‘For God’s sake’ and, ‘In God’s name’ as expressions of frustration and not as vows before almighty God. I cringe when I hear such words.

Heathen people swear by their own gods, of course. In our society we have people swearing upon the Bible or other religious text in court. They swear to tell the truth and nothing but the truth. Thankfully our courts still take this oath seriously. Justice Einfield went to prison for two years for telling a lie in court about a speeding fine after taking this oath; this is called perjury.

But tragically our society no longer takes seriously oaths sworn before a minister of religion or even a magistrate when this oath relates to marriage. Yes, almost every marriage involves the taking of vows, ‘To love and to hold, from this day forth, until death do us part’. Are such vows any less solemn than a vow tell the truth about a speeding fine in a court of law- to which a prison sentence was attached? Such is the perversity of our generation (Acts 2:40), and we are paying the price for this perversity. The marriage vow heard by the minister is in the presence of the Lord. It is a vow taken before the Lord.

In the Bible we read of vows being taken when people made a promise to the Lord, often when praying for deliverance. These vows were often associated with offerings to the Lord. The Lord takes vows seriously, and so should we. When a person vowed to sacrifice to the Lord a perfect animal but sacrificed a blemished animal instead, the Lord regarded this as sin (Mal 1:14). Have ever promised to give to the Lord and not kept this promise? Vows to the Lord or before the Lord must be kept; to break a vow is sin, serious sin (Deut 23:21, Numb 30:2). No matter what the vow or to whom the vow is made, a vow before the Lord must be kept.

The most famous or infamous taking of a vow in the Bible is that of Jephthah the judge. As he went to fight the Ammonites, Jephthah vowed to the Lord that if He gave him victory over the Ammonites then, ‘Whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord’s, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering’ (Judges 11:31). Just what this man expected to come out the door of his house when he returned in victory we do not know. What we do know is that it was a rash and unnecessary vow which had a tragic result.

When Jephthah returned home from defeating the Ammonites, ‘There was his daughter, coming out to meet him’ (Judges 11:34). She was his only child. She came out celebrating her father’s victory. But the celebration ceased when Jephthah tore his clothes and screamed in horror, ‘Alas, my daughter!’ He explained that he had given his word to the Lord and could not go back on it.

Did Jephthah keep his vow? Did he offer his daughter as a burnt offering? Surely he would renege on his vow when he saw it was his own child that became the target of his vow. In a day when written agreements and even solemn vows, like marriage vows, are taken so lightly, we think Jephthah should simply have gone back on his word. Jephthah’s theology may have less informed than ours, but his fear of God certainly wasn’t.

Our Westminster Confession of Faith has a chapter entitled, ‘Of lawful oaths and vows’. It reminds us that vows are to be taken only in the name of God, and only with holy fear and reverence. We must not make vows to do anything contrary to what the Bible says, or knowing that we cannot keep the solemn promise we make; in God’s sight we make a vow, and in God’s strength we keep a vow.