

## Second Sunday of Lent

Sermon by Mr. Chris Webb. 28<sup>th</sup> February 2021

Readings: Genesis 17.1-7 & 15-16 :Romans 4. 13-end: Mark 8. 31-end

In the readings for today we can find great hope and security in having a right relationship with our Heavenly Father, and also great challenges.

Let me unwrap the thinking behind these opening words and let me start to do so by looking at the story of Abram (later, Abraham). In our reading we hear of God's promise to him and the covenant relationship which God invites Abram to enter into. In his letter to the church at Rome, the apostle Paul refers to Abram being 'as good as dead' by virtue of his great age at the time of his encounter with God. His wife Sarai, also of great age had well and truly given up the hope of bearing a child.

Unlikely candidates then to become ancestors of a multitude of nations.

And yet.

Remember what Jesus was to say in response to his disciples' question, "Then who can be saved?" We are told by Matthew that Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but for God *all* things are possible.'

So that is great cause to be hopeful; that at any stage in our life and at a time when we have all but given up on any hopes that we might have or might have had, God has not given up on us. He still calls us and holds us in close relationship with him; a state of righteousness; that is to say, in a place where all things can be right between ourselves and God our Heavenly Father. How humbling to consider that we are members of that multitude of nations who have Abram as our ancestor in that relationship.

There is another sense in respect of which through Abram's story we may feel, if not hope, then certainly draw comfort. The comfort of knowing that others before us have been uncertain of how to discern God's will and also how others before us have experienced impatience with God's timetable.

Earlier in Genesis we can read how Abram had been promised descendants more numerous than the stars, and of the steps which Abram and Sarai with the help of Sarai's servant had taken to speed things along a bit! (or so they thought).

But here at chapter 17 God promises that it is with his wife Sarai (to be re-named Sarah) that Abraham is to have a descendant and indeed countless descendants in accordance with God's plan.

Along with a story of hope there comes one of our challenges. To put ourselves into God's hands and to be patient in discerning his will. Patient in waiting for the time when God wishes to use us in his creative work to bring about his purposes for us and for the world in which we live.

How good are you at waiting? How patient are you? Maybe in this season of Lent this is something we can think about. I have come across some wise words on the topic. A writer makes the point that we are afraid of wasting time. They continue, "We speak of giving 'quality time' to our loved ones, our special interests, our work, as though there was first or second class time. Surely God's time is always quality time, and whatever is happening in time, he gives it quality, for it is part of eternity -and when we realise that, life takes on a new dimension, whether waiting, working or wasting it!"<sup>1</sup> Perhaps especially since this is not only Lent but a continuation of a strange time in which the Covid-19 pandemic has held sway this is something to contemplate in a positive way.

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Cundiff, "Something for the journey" p115

Turning to our gospel reading our challenges certainly come to the fore. Here we are challenged to contemplate the cost of discipleship. It is outlined in stark relief by Jesus. He warns of the inevitability of suffering for a people called to follow in his footsteps.

This is not suffering for the sake of suffering, as though somehow suffering makes us virtuous; is 'good' for us. That would be to adopt the same sort of attitude which might lead us to think that the action of depriving ourselves of some or other luxury during Lent is virtuous and worthwhile in itself. The prophet Isaiah when challenging *false* worship asks' "Is such a fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?<sup>2</sup> Isaiah goes on to say that positive steps such as liberating people from bondage and feeding the hungry and giving clothing to those in need are what God seeks, so that we become 'like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail..<sup>3</sup>

That's more in line with our West Hereford Team's chosen theme for Lent; "**Loving in Lent and Loving Lent**".

Suffering is inevitable, rather, because the gospel challenges the power structures of the world and accepted norms in society. Might is right and wealth to be acquired whatever the cost. Power and influence is to be sought and hung onto at any cost.

To Peter, the impetuous disciple, Jesus' words in our reading from Mark's gospel are a severe shock to the system. He'd got the title right - "You are the **Messiah**" he had said. It was everything else that he got wrong. After following Jesus around and taking note of what he had seen and heard he knew in his heart that Jesus was the real deal. He really was the long-expected Messiah who was going to put an end to all repression and to set the world free. It was the context which he got so very wrong. It is in John's gospel that we hear Jesus, standing before Pilate at his 'trial' summing it up. "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews." <sup>4</sup>Should Peter have known? Well yes, he should have known, but would we, standing in his shoes have known? Do we even now take this knowledge fully on board? Peter had seen Jesus engage with the outcasts. Those hated by contemporary society. The poor and sick who were so neglected by the society in which they lived that they had to beg for a living. Those who by the nature of their sickness were banished from contact with the society of which they had been part. Are these the sort of people that those seeking power would bother about let alone engage and empathise with? Heal and give comfort to?

Jesus offers us an eternal life in a right relationship with God if we place our lives in his hands; our faith in him. Do we fully grasp that, as we find comfort in the material wellbeing we enjoy? We are so fortunate in not having within our lifetimes experienced true persecution. There are words of Jesus in our reading that warrant careful consideration and which might lift us out of any complacency. "Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father." In **Loving in Lent and Loving Lent** maybe we could reach out in charity to those charities which give hope to people in prison for their beliefs; those who are persecuted to the point of injury and death for being true disciples of our living Lord. Those for whom the cost of discipleship is all too apparent.  
Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 58.v5

<sup>3</sup> Ibid v 13

<sup>4</sup> John 18.36