

2nd Sunday of Lent

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18 Philippians 3:17-4:1 Luke 13:31-35

last week at the joint service at Christ the Worker I spoke of Lent as a time for us to renew our sense of vocation, our calling to be followers of Jesus; just as the 'temptations' resisted by Jesus are tests of his vocation as Son of God, so we too should notice and resist all that might deflect us from our path; Lent asks more of us than whether we can stick to our guns over chocolate or booze

we heard from Josh Cleaver –safely arrived today with the family in Moscow, and from Jess Horsfall – now Sister Jessica of Mucknell Abbey; they told how their vocations have been tested; a common theme was the temptation to measure 'success' in their calling, whether it's the number of orphans helped, or the number of hours spent in prayer! vocation can often look like 'failure' rather than 'success'

today's readings invite us to explore these ideas further; as we look at the lives of Abraham, Paul and Jesus, we again find people dealing more with 'failure' than 'success'; first Abraham:

it's worth placing this key moment in Genesis 15 in its larger context of the story of Abraham; one small detail – you may have wondered if our reader was not pronouncing his name very clearly, but no, Abraham is still Abram at this point; he still 'mighty father', rather than 'father of many'

the story begins back in Genesis 12 with Abram's call to leave his home, with the promise of a new land and a great nation; he and Sarai [not Sarah yet] travel through Canaan, down to Egypt and back again, all the time waiting for a child of their own; time passes; Abram and Sarai prosper, but they're getting older and there's still no sign of a child

no wonder then, when God announces in today's passage, 'Good news, Abram! all is well!', he answers 'what good news? where is the son you promised us? at this rate one of my sons by a slave woman will be my heir!'

God replies, 'look at the stars, Abram – that's how many descendants you will have'; we don't see many stars here, with all our light pollution; but out in the desert, on a cloudless night – wow! the heavens are just packed with bright pinpoints! that's a lot of descendants!

and, we're told, Abram 'believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness'; that's a phrase picked up and worked over at length by Paul in his letter to the Romans, because it expresses the essence of a faith that does not depend on us *doing* anything: just believe!

but actually, in context, this is not a general statement about faith; like the temptations of Jesus last week, Abram's faith is highly specific to his situation and calling: the promise of a son

even after the covenant is renewed with animal sacrifices, with smoking fire pot and flaming torch, Abram still faces temptations to divert from the path of faith; it's not till Gen 21 that we finally reach the birth of Isaac

on the way Sarai persuades Abram to have a child by the slave Hagar, for by this time he is already 86 years old, and she's not much younger; then another 13 years pass before the three angelic visitors arrive and Sarai laughs at their prediction that she'll bear a child within a year; it's a still long wait for them!

how do you carry on believing when hope is deferred so long? what does it mean for us to have faith in God's calling on our lives, when there seem to be so many obstacles and delays? perhaps, as Josh and Jess said last Sunday, when vocation feels like 'death', with 'resurrection' long postponed, it is simply to believe that God is faithful, that it is worth keeping going, despite all appearances: is that you?

last week I said that one of my intentions this Lent is to spend time with people, talking about their vocation, their spiritual life, their sense of where God may be leading them; I've had a few expressions of interest, but I repeat my invitation: talk to me!

now a short visit to Paul and his vocation: in Phil 3 he urges Christians to 'join in imitating me', rather than those he calls 'enemies of the cross of Christ'

earlier on Paul describes how he's set aside all the things that once gave him status (as 'Hebrew of Hebrews' etc.), for he 'counts everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ'; the 'enemies of the cross' have their minds set on earthly things – on success or wealth or physical pleasures – but 'our citizenship is in heaven'

the temptation is always there, to seek our own comfort and well-being, to follow our own desires and interests; as I said last week, these aren't necessarily bad things in themselves, but we need to ask, are they the *right* good things? turning stones into bread wasn't wicked, just not what Jesus was called to do right then

ultimately Paul's aim is 'to know Christ ... becoming like him in his death ... and so somehow attain the resurrection'; and that is our aim too, to become a Christ-like church, Christ-like Christians, and that's why we focus on those three Cs, seeking to be more Contemplative, Compassionate and Courageous

but these 3 Cs are no recipe for 'success'! pursuing them will sometimes feel more like death than life, as we let go of our own priorities, in order to seek God's; following our vocation faithfully is tough, so Paul says here, 'stand firm in the Lord, my beloved'; and that is what I'd want to say to you too: 'stand firm in the Lord, ...'

finally, to Jesus himself, and this odd little collection of sayings that don't seem to hang together or make a lot of sense; again the context will help: back in Luke 9, Jesus has 'set his face' towards Jerusalem, having warned his disciples what lies ahead for him there

it is this trajectory of the journey to Jerusalem, and the unfolding of God's purposes, that holds these verses together: first some Pharisees warn Jesus of a threat from King Herod; wouldn't it be wise for him to get out of the way, to keep a low profile for a bit?

this might remind us of Peter daring to rebuke Jesus for his talk of the cross, and Jesus' reply, 'get behind me, Satan!'; the temptation to turn aside, to take the easier path, comes round again, and Jesus has to stand firm: 'it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside Jerusalem; that is where I must go!'

but set against that fierce resolve and resisting of temptation, is the infinitely vulnerable love expressed in the verses that follow: ‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often have I desired to gather your children as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!’

for there’s another temptation here: to see those that reject the good news, that reject Jesus – whether it’s Herod, the Pharisees, the Romans, the Jewish crowds – to see them as enemies, to be crushed, defeated; but that’s not Jesus’ way

we were reflecting on this in the first of our Lent Course sessions this week; how Jesus offers love and forgiveness even at the most extreme point of his suffering on the cross; and he calls us to do the same, though we may find it profoundly challenging to do so

how are we doing then, in our call to follow Jesus this Lent? is it a struggle? is the promise of something good deferred too long? does it feel like death more than life? are we tempted to turn aside, to settle for what is easy, to avoid risks, to pursue our own concerns and worries? if so, we are in good company!

Abram waited decades and strayed several times on the way, but he held on in faith to God’s promise of a son, that was eventually fulfilled

Paul struggled against opposition and misunderstanding; his letters reveal anguish and heartache, but also a determination to become like Christ at all costs

and Jesus himself ... what can one say? he sees through his vocation with fierce resolve and vulnerable love, and says to us: ‘come, take up your cross, and follow me!’

that is the invitation of Lent – will we accept it?