

A Sermon for Lent 2; 1 March 2015
The United Benefice of Holland Park

Genesis 17.1-7,15,16

Psalms 22.23-31

Romans 4.13-25

Mark 8.31-38

Robert Thompson

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Mark 8.34b)

Undoubtedly it is because it is my last Sunday in the parishes that my attention this week drew primarily to our reading from the Hebrew Bible. I associate the characters of Abraham and Sarah primarily with both the emotional and physical reality of journeying and travel. Their story is told in chapters 11-25 of the Book of Genesis. Today’s passage is the third renewal of the initial establishing of a personal relationship between God and Abraham in Genesis 12. It was a relationship that led Abraham to set out and journey in trust from Haran in search of the land of promise. But as Genesis tells it the direction of travel is never straightforward, and having come to Canaan a famine strikes and Abraham's family are exiled to Egypt. The whole Abrahamic cycle of stories is one of both physical, emotional and relational coming and going, ups and downs, turns and uturns and roundabouts. But all this is undergirded by a deep sense of the faithfulness of God, of the trustworthiness of what is ultimately most real and important.

The story of Abraham and Sarah chimes with the fact that I am about to embark on a journey myself. Mine is not so much physical travel, in that I am not even leaving the flat in which I live. Nor does it involve great distance, in that my parish

affiliation is just shifting across to the other side of Holland Park Avenue. Nor does it involve the level of material sacrifice that the stories in Genesis depict, in that unlike these characters I am neither exile, nor immigrant nor refugee.

But my changing of parish affiliation is a journey to a very different place. My licensing tomorrow night will be in St James' Norlands. Its grand setting in James' Gardens makes it look much like our own parishes. But this is the facade of the parishes St Clement and St James, behind which lies communities of great colour and diversity with high levels of social and economic deprivation. Only 50% are ethnically white. 75% of people live in social housing. The Church Urban Fund ranks it in the bottom 7% of parishes in the country on measurements of poverty.

My journey is however a relational and emotional one. Although it is neither physically far nor arduous it does in part involve a parting from these communities of St George's and St John's. These are communities saturated with colourful, diverse, quirky, idiosyncratic, lovable and loving people, that's you. You have been, over the past 11 years of my association with St George's and 6 years of my more committed presence in both parishes, the location of what it is that I as a priest 'do' - in presidency at the Eucharist, preaching and teaching. But much, much more than that you have imprinted yourselves upon my own being, shaping me, teaching me, helping me to be a more faithful follower of Jesus, much more than I have ever shaped, taught, or helped you.

What I deeply love about these communities, and the ways in which they have been shaped and nurtured over time, is that real tangible sense of the humane, compassionate and humble ways in which we live out our following of Christ

together. I also have much valued the simple unfussy but dignified manner of our worship. There is a positive lack of religious arrogance or pretension. There is wonderful honesty about critically engaging with what it is we hear in scripture with the realities of the lived experiences of our lives. Knowing ourselves to be immensely materially privileged there is a real commitment to serving others through our support of St Mungo's Broadway and Christian Aid. Realising that none of us are ever perfect there is a definable lack of judging others for what they believe, or how they live out their faith and conduct their lives.

Like us, the characters of Abraham and Sarah were not perfect either. Although following the call of God, they are often portrayed as flawed, feeble, failing human beings. Behind the story we hear today lie the characters of Hagar and Ishmael. Hagar was an Egyptian servant girl of Sarah. Because Sarah was unable to have children she offered Hagar sexually to her husband. Sarah and Hagar's relationship inevitably disintegrated. The jealous wife treated the servant harshly and eventually Hagar was banished from the household. In exile in the desert an appearance of an angel prompts her to return to Abraham. But when Sarah's son Isaac was born the relationship between Hagar and Sarah came to its tragic, climatic end. At Isaac's weaning celebration Sarah found the teenage Ishmael mocking her son. Deeply upset she demanded that Abraham throw Hagar and her son out. Sarah declared that Ishmael would not share in Isaac's inheritance. Hagar and Ishmael run out of water in the desert and are at the point of death when an angel appears and opens Hagar's eyes to see a well. The angel promises Hagar that God "*will make a great nation*" of Ishmael. Hagar and Ishmael were saved. Hagar found her son a wife from her native home in the land of Egypt and they settled in the Desert of Paran (Gen 21:14-21).

The stories of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac, of Hagar and Ishmael are ones that depict deep and searing, domestic and personal loves and passions: the incapacity to live up to what was expected in marriage at the time, the bearing of an heir; the exploitation of a servant for sexual ends; the jealousy and envy that comes from seeing the ability of others; the abuse of power in manipulation, persecution, and expulsion. Nothing much changes: the more the world turns, history advances and the political landscape is transformed, the more it stays the same. Both the generative and destructive power of human relationships and of individual emotions are captured in these texts, which is why, as myth, they still ring true true for us today.

Like us these characters were not perfect. Yet this all too human depiction of our biblical heroes is framed with the persistent, enduring and expansive love of God; and it is strung together by the all too inadequate characters' continuing trust in the faithfulness of the God who initially called them. Although in the Christian faith we have tended to focus on the story of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac, because we following Jesus who was Jewish, trace our own spiritual ancestry through this line, the text is very clear that God's expansive love, God's promise and God's blessing rests on Hagar and Ishmael too. God's promise, even here in Genesis, is not sectarian, nor partisan nor partial, but it falls on those whom God chooses it to fall, even those beyond our own tight family units, associations and clubs, even on those whom we expel from our own communities.

Paul in his theological reflection on the faith of Abraham in today's epistle rather paints over the Hebrew Bible's much more intensely morally problematic and ambiguous depiction of our spiritual ancestor. It's as if Paul is a theological spin

doctor telling a tale that suits his own purpose, and failing to give due balance in judgement of the ancient biblical texts. Paul here is like our modern use of Photoshop, airbrushing away not only Abraham's faults but also eliminating any recollection of God's promise to Hagar and Ishmael and their faith too. His hyperbole reaches its crescendo in his declaration that "No distrust made him (Abraham) waver concerning the promise God" (Romans 4.21). Paul overstates his case. We of course are much like Paul in our own recollection of history, our presentations of theology and the telling of our own stories. We tell them prejudicially in favour of ourselves, overstating our own virtues, marketing ourselves by airbrushing out much that is failing and lacking within us, as well as stereotyping others whom we don't much like.

Peter in the story of Jesus' life in the gospels is also presented as a character in whom imperfection and faithfulness are embodied. He is a prime example of faith and insight among the disciples. He is the one who is able to declare that he knows Jesus to be the Messiah of God. But in today's reading we encounter his depiction as an equally prime example of the failure to understand that Jesus' messianic vocation includes suffering and death on a cross. Jesus in today's text then includes his own disciples in this vocation: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?" (Mark 8. 34b-36).

In T.S. Eliot's famous poem the *Journey of the Magi* today's themes of journey, human imperfection and the embrace of

death are brought together in the final stanza. After one of the wise men has told us the tale of the long and deep journey, in the sharp weather of the dead of winter, and of their encounter with the Christ child he continues to recollect:

“All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we lead all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I have seen birth and
death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.”

The Magi came simply to witness the produce of a birth. But that adoration of the Christ precipitated their own death. It led not to contentment but to a lack of ease with the ways in which they had lived their lives before, and the gods, the objects, of their former worship. It was unease that makes the Magus who narrates the poem yearn for yet another death.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” In this Lenten season we are asked to acquire the consciousness of Eliot’s wise traveller, of our own need to die to ourselves as we continue to adore the Christ and follow Jesus. We are asked to become increasingly aware of our own separation from God, of our imperfections, of our 'sinfulness,' and of need our to turn again in repentance. Today's biblical 'heroes' give us some comfort in the midst of that task: like them we

too can still be faithful followers of God, despite our faltering, failing and flaws. Faithful followers, not because of observing any exacting disciplines in Lent, the repeated practice of which, we may delusionally think, might lead us closer to perfection. For as Paul in Romans rightly argues there is nothing we can do, no law that we can follow, which can bring us an inch closer to God, that is only the fruit of faith. Rather we are called to be faithful followers, who like the rose blighted by the aphid which still opens itself up to the rays of the sun, learn to open ourselves up to the enlivening heat and energy which is simply God's grace in the person of Jesus Christ.

So as I journey on I hope and pray that this community may remain humble, and humorous, compassionate and dignified, and above all not too religious but fully humane. I hope that you continue to find God not just in church or in Christians, but in the entirety of your lives, in every event, in joy and in sorrow, and in the faces and bodies of every single human person you meet. It is with such an opening up to God's grace in others to which Lent calls us. It is such an opening up that will sustain us on all our journeys, ameliorate our imperfections, and bring us through our acceptance of suffering and death and the cross to the the joy of resurrection.

So I end with the poem *Chant Against Death* of the contemporary Caribbean poet Mervyn Morris. Its short, sharp, incisive verse which celebrates life, embodies faith and trust in the ultimate goodness of all creation and ends our journey in risen life.

Chant Against Death

say family

say friends
say wife
say love
say life

say learning
laughter
sunlight
rain

say cycle
circle
music
memory
say night & day
say sun & moon

say
see you soon

