

Sermon for 28 February 2021

St Andrew's, Newgate Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, Diocese of Newcastle

Lent 2

Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16; Romans 4: 13-25; Mark 8: 31 – 9:1

HARD CHOICES?

May my words and my meditation of our hearts be acceptable to the Lord, our strength, and our redeemer, Amen.

I am writing this sermon about 12 days before it is due to be read in your comfortable presence at home. Yet, it is with quite a heavy heart that I penned these words. We live in extraordinarily strange times. We are still in national lockdown, and we await what our Prime Minister will be deciding in the coming days, as if the decisional goal posts have not constantly shifted during the entire course of the pandemic! The Tory Government's record of handling this human crisis will be assessed by historians, economists, anthropologists, sociologists, politicians, and even theologians, in the months and years to come.

Some of you will no doubt already feel and think that the language used during the pandemic has been premature (or, immature!) and wholly inappropriate. Invoking even wartime Churchillian-type rhetoric, we heard the ill-thought-through language of 'fight' and 'battle', not to say the risible use of 'world-beating', 'oven-ready' (referring to the Brexit deal), and 'world-class' (referring to our educational system).

What are the signs of hope (think of the time-honoured single malt), **rather than optimism** (think of the quick sugar fix Coca Cola)? **Should we continue to trust in God, in humanity, and in science, not necessarily in this order?**

The latest vaccine rollout figure gives a total of more than 15.5 million of the UK population having received their first dose. That is a remarkable achievement in a relatively short time since 8 December 2020, but the key question of vaccine equity and justice is one that we cannot avoid in the coming weeks and months.

Yet, we are dealing with a daily high infection rate. With currently more than 23,000 still in intensive or critical care in the nation's overstretched hospitals,

with exhausted and much stressed clinical and ancillary staff. And we find that small section of the population whose actions during lockdown run counter to all norms of human decency!

At the same time, livelihoods and homes are continually being lost despite some help from the Chancellor. Those working fulltime and having home-schooling responsibilities are triply stressed out, alongside children requiring attention, declining mental health, let alone coping with slow wi-fi and lack of equipment.

Dangerous and illegal cladding on high rise apartment blocks continue to be a bane to those living in them, with no one really coming forward owning up to their responsibility for restitution. The homeless and destitute asylum-seekers are still with us. The demands placed on foodbanks and neighbourhood mutual-aid groups have soared exponentially. Crucially, the world's conflicts (especially Yemen, Afghanistan, Iraq, South Asia), old and new crises (former Soviet republics, Hong Kong, Myanmar), and both human deaths and humanitarian catastrophes have not disappeared.

Many folks now realise that the availability of Skype/Facetime/Zoom/Teams and other technological wonders has not and can never mitigate for the deep loss of that personal touch and social contact! We are irreducibly palpable creatures made in the image of God.

Looking at the familiar and well-known Bible readings set for today, it is very difficult to see how we might frame them in a way that would make even any remote sense of the circumstances that we find ourselves in. What does it mean to look to Abraham, the father of faith? What does it mean to take heart in God's promises at this juncture in our nation's and the world's destiny?

Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16 (NRSVA) **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. ² And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.' ³ Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴ 'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵ 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. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ 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.

¹⁵ God said to Abraham, ‘As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶ 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.’

As we read Genesis 17 (selected verses owing to the quiriness of the lectionary), we should bear in mind its connection with Genesis 1 (the Creation account with its implications for humanity to enjoy God’s provision) and Genesis 9 (the post Flood narratives where once again there is grace following God’s judgement). I think the choices facing Abraham were stark. Even the name change will present him with a huge responsibility on his elderly shoulders: from being an “exalted ancestor” he will be “ancestor of a multitude” of nations! The covenantal arrangement goes into perpetuity. There is practically no turning back for this old man.

Furthermore, 13 or 14 years after the birth of Ishmael Abraham’s first son, born of a slave woman from a possibly despised ethnic group, there is this promise of another offspring to Sarah his elderly wife. Hard choices in those difficult semi-nomadic times.

Fast forward several centuries, through the testing of faith we begin to see the fulfilment of God’s promises for the whole of creation:

Romans 4:13-25 (NRSVA) **God’s Promise Realised through Faith**

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵ For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

¹⁶ 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, ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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.’ ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹ being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²² Therefore his faith ‘was reckoned to him as righteousness.’ ²³ Now the words, ‘it was reckoned to him’, were written not for his sake alone, ²⁴ but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, ²⁵ who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

The rich patriarchal episode is necessarily and artfully picked up by the apostle Paul in his celebrated passage about righteousness and faith, in a manner that exceeds all our expectations because of that miraculous transference from a material particularity to a spiritual universality. ²³ Now the words, ‘it was reckoned to him’, were written not for his sake alone, ²⁴ but for ours also.

Here lies our Christian inheritance from a seed that was sown ages ago. It is a powerful testimony to the way agency is imputed not only to Abraham, but ultimately to the work of God in Christ.

Unsurprisingly, we come to the Gospel passage for today, with further hard choices.

Mark 8: 31 – 9:1 (NRSVA) **Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection**

³¹ Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸ 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 with the holy angels.’

9 ¹ And he said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.’

Strong words indeed in this oft-quoted Markan passage. Hard choices do not leave any room for cosy understandings of the cross. We cannot avoid the intense political readings of the Gospel either. The cross was capital punishment, physical torture, and symbolic of Roman oppression, especially for the first century Jew. Many who were crucified were rebels who resisted the Empire. They wanted to overthrow the Roman occupiers and regain their independence. At the same time, there is always the temptation to gloss over imperial evil.

A URC colleague in Glasgow has recently helpfully reflected on this passage:

“Jesus’ call to take up one’s cross would have been heard as a call to resist the might of Rome - and to be ready to bear the consequences. No wonder Peter told Jesus off - this was

dangerous talk and they'd all end up on crosses if that continued. Nowadays most of us tend not to see the cost of discipleship to be about resistance to empire (after all many have a sneaking regard for the British empire) or about standing up to oppression (we're not oppressed in Britain, are we?). Yet I wonder what taking Jesus' words at face value might do for our understanding of discipleship. Resisting the empire now might mean asserting that Black lives do, indeed, matter as they are endangered by racist people, systems, and policies. It might mean looking at the hidden-in-plain-sight imperial systems all around us - from imperial loot in our museums to unjust immigration controls; from unimaginable wealth of our cities and institutions generated by slavery to the debates around Brexit."

(Revd Andy Braunston, URC Daily Devotion, 10.2.2021)

I should add, how the Church of England especially has itself much benefitted from this imperial legacy, yet we hardly dare speak up in God's name to call for institutional remorse and restitution.

I complete this sermon soon after the 27th anniversary of my Admission and Licensing as a Reader in the Church of England. 11 February 1994 was a day to be remembered as Bishop Alec Graham conducted the short service in the private chapel at Bishop's House in Gosforth, Newcastle upon Tyne. With the benefit of hindsight, as ever, it was the right choice to continue as a Reader and lay person after having twice (1992 and 1996) been turned down by the national selection conferences for ordination to the priesthood. It was probably the right decision, but the selectors' unconscious bias, subtle racism, English class snobbery, and 'character assassination' in their reporting were most unedifying. It has been heartening though when many close friends, including priests and our former Vicar, Glyn, have often lamented that I was not ordained.

Let not hard choices detract or deflect us from truly hoping in God!

The Windows

Lord, how can man preach thy eternal word?

He is a brittle crazy glass:

Yet in thy temple thou dost him afford

This glorious and transcendent place,

To be a window, through thy grace.

Feast of George Herbert, 27 February.