

Second Sunday of Lent
Year C - 17/3/2019

Genesis 15:1-12; 17-18
Psalm 27
Philippians 3:17-4:1
Luke 13:1-9

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

It is often said “the only thing constant in our life is change.” And it is true, I think, to a large degree, that the only thing that we can ever be sure of is that things are always changing - there are always medical advancements, newer models of mobile phones, the tensions and alliances between two countries can be different from one day to the next; and what worries us personally one week will be replaced or superseded by something else next week.

So, in our everyday life, I think it fair to agree with my first statement. Is it the same for our faith, do you think? Can we say the same thing about God, and about our belief in God?

We often talk about our faith as though it is a journey, or we might speak of our walk of faith. Some people spend much time wrestling with theology, or even, in Jacob’s case, wrestling with God! But what I would suggest to you today, as we reflect especially on the story of Abraham, that in fact it is *us* who is changing or journeying, and that we can be assured of just one thing in our lives - that is the constancy of God’s love.

You know the full story from which we heard an excerpt today, I am sure. Abraham is a man who has left his home and staked his whole future on a promise from God... that God will give him a land and make a great nation of him. But as our story opens, we find Abraham an old man... Sure God’s been good to him... he’s prospered in many ways... but...there’s no sign of children.

The reading opens with Abraham’s lament - ‘How on earth can I ever become a great nation when I don’t have any children? You’re cutting this pretty fine God...

Sarah and I are old! What do you intend to do about this? I can't see any sign of you doing anything about it!

... Stop the frame there! Don't rush to the 'happy ending'. What's the human reality? What's it like to be there in that place... where you want to believe in God's love and care for you, God's provision of a good future... but you can't see anything happening... What's it like? Because we all know this experience.

It is one of the most common pastoral experiences for a priest, sitting with people as they go through the experience of Abraham...

A woman who can't have children, perhaps even suffering multiple miscarriages. Someone desperate for love and yet unable to meet a life-partner. Someone living with an ongoing depression or illness, desperately wanting to believe there's healing... but the months just go on and on without change. Someone in bereavement, who hears the voice of the church and friends saying that life will return... but all they can see is unrelenting darkness and grief.

Good people all - wanting to be faithful, wanting to trust God, but who look at their lives and see no help or hint of change on the horizon... and who are starting to ask... 'What sort of a God is this?' As a priest, or as a friend in Christ you say... 'Be patient... don't give up. Trust in God... wait patiently. God won't let you down.'

You say this because it's what the Church teaches... and usually because you believe it... But you know their experience yourself... you might live it now in your own life. We wait... we try to be faithful... to trust. But all we have is this unsubstantiated promise... this non-specific hope, that God will do something. And we look and look... but we can't see God doing anything!

Superficial religion rushes forward to a fake 'happy ending' where everything is 'just so wonderful with Jesus'... glossing over the pain and struggle. But we are called to a real faith... an adult faith... and this is where the issue really comes to a head.

How do we keep waiting... and trusting... when we can't see how God's promise of abundant life is ever going to become a reality?

Today's scripture portion is only a small part of the long Abraham story. And if we go through that story in its entirety there are plenty of times when we might still be tempted to say that God has abandoned Abram - that the faith of Abram is in vain.

In his faithfulness, however, God's plans for Abraham are finally realised, and the covenant which God made with him is finally fulfilled, and his descendants do indeed become more numerous than the stars in the heavens. The result of Abram's faith is transformation; the complete turning around of his hopes and dreams, into a person whom God could use to his glory.

This promise is ours, also; the hope for personal transformation is a reality, in God's grace. The whole of our lives, turned around; made new; made perfect. The question, as always, is how? How do we remain faithful in the face of our doubts and our fears and our human frailty. How do we trust in God's promise of transformation? Let me suggest three ways which may help you in this process.

The first is constantly returning to the revelation of Scripture, especially the words of Jesus, where we hear it proclaimed, without doubt or equivocation...

God is trustworthy! We can commit ourselves with confidence into God's hands because God never lets us down. God always honours His promises. Keep these words close to your heart and turn them over... not once or twice... but constantly like a mantra... especially in times of anxiety.

The second is to collect a 'library' of past experiences of how and where God has acted in your life. Looking at Abraham critically, by the time of today's lament, he's really got a large body of information about how essentially good and generous God is. His life really has prospered... so perhaps he could have exhibited more confidence in the future???

It's certainly true of my life... which is full to the brim of mercy, generosity, good things... So I'm aware of how unreasonable and unfair my anxiety about the future is! We can collect our own faith-history, where we list the ways and times that God has been good to us. And when the times of doubt and anxiety come, we can draw on this bank of past experience, reminding ourselves... if God has been this good to me in times past, surely God will continue in the same character and behaviour in the future!

The third thing to do is to develop the eyes that discern the movement of God's Spirit. The truth is... it only *appears* as if God is inactive in the fulfilment of His promises. In reality there is constant movement in our lives. In part our blindness is because we are not intentional enough in our looking. We are so focused on the big and grand that we overlook the small and humble as insignificant.

In part our blindness is because we're not open to the surprise of the unexpected. God is active in our lives... through mysterious grace, drawing us inexorably to abundant life... and if we practice the spiritual gift of careful looking (called discernment) we might be amazed at the movement we see.

These are three ways we can build confidence, hope and trust as we wait. But none of this is to suggest that it's easy. This place, the wilderness place where we wait for God's promises to be fulfilled, is a place of struggle and temptation... where the choices take careful discernment.

Our faith says that God is entirely trustworthy and His promises can be utterly relied upon. I want to be a person who lives out of that faith. I want to be able to say. "the only thing that is constant in my life is not change, it is God - God's goodness and the promise that I will be transformed."

The Lord be with you.