

SERMON – 2ND OF LENT, 280221 – GENESIS 17, MARK 8

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



I wonder what the 99 year old Abram was doing when God appeared to him. Snoozing quietly beside a desert oasis, sitting watching his cattle and herds, looking up into the night sky. We know that the fact he had no legitimate heir was something that troubled him. A couple of chapters earlier in Genesis the Word of the Lord had come to him in a vision – the start of chapter 15

'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.' ²But Abram said, 'O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?' ³And Abram said, 'You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.' ⁴But the word of the LORD came to him, 'This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.' ⁵He brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' ⁶And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.



I've said before that I love that picture – one of the gorgeous things about Northumberland is that you can see the skies so well, and I have stood and looked up – “count the stars, if you're able to” – so shall your descendants be. I joke about “one of these days I'll get grandchildren”, but it is easy for those of with several children to forget the pain of those who cannot have any, who have not had any, and I hope I never underestimate that.

I can imagine Abram and Sara in their old age, and she's never quite forgiven him for the fact Hagar the slave girl bore him a son (even if that was Sara's

idea) – it isn't right, it was not meant to be that way, it hurts. You learn to live with pain and grief, even to find peace, but I doubt Abram was truly at peace. God had made him a promise, that does not seem to have been fulfilled.

And the Lord appears to him again

I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. ²And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.'



I have to be careful what I say about “walking with the Lord” as a voice from the study will soon remind me that not everyone can walk – just a reminder to watch our language. But Morgan the powerchair has enabled the two of us to go for a walk together – and that is a powerful image. A God who is so close to us, that he literally journeys with us – usually my wife powers before me, and I'm having to work to keep up. God is promising a covenant, a relationship – and that should blow our minds. That God, eternal, omnipotent, all the other big words – that God has a relationship with little me. God loves me.



We had Noah's covenant last week – the covenant sealed with a rainbow. You can imagine that story being part of the mythology of the tribe, a way of taking what is a natural phenomena and making it holy. At its basis light through water, but it is more than that. (I haven't found a photo of St Edmund's and a rainbow, so this one will have to do). Abram's covenant is even more personal, a relationship, says God, with you and your wife – and all your descendants. Those of you with grandchildren, great grandchildren – you understand how this feels. If you're a tribal leader, the ruler of a desert tribe – this gives you the assurance of a future.



One of my favourite spots in London is the British Museum, and the galleries about Abram and the Middle East. I have never been to the real desert, never been to those countries – my nearest understanding is “Laurence of Arabia” or Poirot “Murder in Mesopotamia” – but there is still something about that cradle of civilisation. One day humanity will learn that we are all inter-connected, a reminder that Abraham is special for Jew, for Muslim and for Christian.



I was going to move on to the gospel at his point, then re-read the story, and realised that I’ve told it all from Abram’s point of view, and painted Sarai in a negative light. While my wife will tell me off about “walking”, my daughter would – were she to read this sermon – tell me off for only giving the male point of view, and she has a point. It has pulled me up – I believe I am good at equality, but because I didn’t think, patriarchy rules.

As you read on into chapter 18, it does read as if God and Abraham are getting it all organised, Sarah has no say in this, and gets told off when she laughs at what the men are planning. I suggest that this part of Genesis would be different if we’d ask the woman to write it. And it does matter – because if our faith and our history and our church and my preaching, does not help a variety of people see God in their experience, then we are failing. This last week we have seen politicians trying to re-write history as they want to see it – but God demands we move outside our comfort zone.



Which brings us on to the gospel, and there’s no comfort zone here. Jesus knows that the journey he is on is a journey to the cross. Just get your head round that a moment, and we can’t. The cross is painful. Not painful in the sense of I’m going to the dentist, it will hurt, but pain that is so excruciating, it

will kill you. Watching “Kind hearts and coronets” or even a Foyle’s War – in the condemned cell waiting for the noose – that is less than journeying to the cross. I cannot get my head round what it must be like to suffer that like that. I’ve usually celebrate Good Friday in a comfortable church, and even a re-enactment in a shopping centre does not really bring over what Jesus was facing. The only time I came close when I was chatting once to a Roman soldier up on Hadrian’s Wall, full re-enactor, full armour. Somehow the conversation got onto Easter, and he joked about “I usually end up somewhere on Good Friday crucifying Jesus” – and that just gave me a glimpse.

It is necessary to remind ourselves that pain and suffering and torture and death, even crucifixion, is still a reality in this world – and that there are Christians worshipping today who will be killed because of their faith. There are men, women and children across this world who will suffer and die because of where they live, who has power over them – and our regular reminder that the migrants who seek to cross the Channel are probably not coming because they think we’re a soft touch, or simply because they want work, they are fleeing persecution and torture and violence.



So that is what Jesus is facing, and what he tells us to take up. Is it any wonder if folk don’t want to get involved? I’m not sure I’m brave enough to be part of it. But if faith is simply for the good times, then what’s the point? Faith, walking with Christ, will involve carrying your cross – but it means that when we are carrying our cross, when we are suffering, when life hurts, we know we are not journeying alone.



I am a Christian because I was born into it, because I found friendship and love and community in church, because in Jesus I find purpose and strength and a relationship with God. On the occasions when I have suffered, I have found a love which has got me through. It is divine love, a relationship with God – and when I watched my sons die, I did feel that God was saying to me “I know your pain” – and it is a relationship with men and women, many of whom share my faith, people who have shown me incredible love. In suffering I have found glory, and it is as simple as that. It doesn’t take away the pain of life, indeed it

can add to pain because I am less able to block out the suffering of others – but it gives me the strength and purpose I need to keep journeying through this life and into the next. To quote the prayer of Cardinal Newman:

O Lord, support us all the day long of this troublous life,
until the shades lengthen, and the evening comes,
and the busy world is hushed, the fever of life is over, and our work done.
Then, Lord, in your mercy grant us a safe lodging, a holy rest,
and peace at the last; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.