

Second Sunday of Lent – YrA – 5 March 2023

Message – Walking in the light and blessing the world

Source of All Being, Eternal Word, and Holy Spirit, open our hearts and minds so that we may walk in the light. **Amen.**

Today's readings are very obviously about faith, faith in the love of God and the faithfully following of our calling.

Our first, short reading is the calling of Abram and God's declaration of the blessings that will follow a faithful response to that call. Though it doesn't seem a big deal for a nomad to leave their land, Abram was leaving the safe surround of his extended family, those known to him. In time, both Isaac and Jacob will be sent back to this homeland, Harran, to find wives.

This short reading is at the heart of fifteen verses (11:27-12:9) that provide the key to understanding Genesis through the eyes of one of its authors, the Yahwist. It is setting up in Abram a typology, an archetype, that will be repeated time and again among the patriarchs and faithful followers of Yahweh. It is a pattern exemplified in the life of Christ. It is, hopefully, our pattern too. God calls and those whom God calls follow that calling and in so doing bring blessing upon themselves, upon those who bless them, and upon all the world.

Abram responded to God's call without hesitation. As the archetype of the faithful servant of God, in the time of Jesus and the New Testament writers, there was a widespread belief that Abram was saved through right actions. With our Christian heritage, such an idea seems odd to us. From our own

experience and as a matter of doctrine, we believe that all of us fall short of God's perfection for our lives, even Abram.

Saint Paul was convinced of this, despite all his efforts to be perfect, 'as to righteousness under the law, blameless' as he put it, Paul knew that he was flawed. He was certain that no one other than Christ could be perfect.

Reading the Hebrew Scriptures it is easy to get the impression that we can earn our way into heaven; that it is simply a matter of following the rules. Yet, rules so often have more than one interpretation. The intent of the law was to express the love of God and of neighbour, which all too often does not fit with well-defined rules.

Nonetheless, at the time Paul was writing the common belief was that Abram had lived a perfect life and earned his blessings even though the law had not yet been given. However, Saint Paul was sure that Christ was the only fulfilment of the law and the prophets. So, here we have in Paul's letter to the Romans his arguments.

Because we don't have the same starting point the arguments may seem a little odd and we are left trying to work out the original context of the author and the audience. Saint Paul wants to leave no doubt that there is a continuous line between the history of the Hebrew Scriptures and the good news of Jesus of Nazareth.

Had we heard the whole of the passage from Genesis chapter eleven verse twenty-seven through to chapter twelve verse nine, we would have seen a similar need for continuity and connection. The passage links Abram to the story of creation,

showing that Abram was a descendant of Adam and that God's promised blessings in creation were now being worked out in the life of Abram and his descendants. Saint Paul is creating that same sense of continuity for his audience. They are not breaking away from their heritage, they are seeing its fulfilment.

Within the New Testament Scriptures, there is a level of consistency, a predominantly unified narrative focused around the life of Christ. We tend to assume that it will have such a unity but there are points where, if we avoid assuming such unity, we can see possible contrary perspectives. The synoptic gospels are very different from John. In our interpretation we often give priority to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, over John. But some of what John says may be read as being quite radically different. There was debate as to whether John's gospel should be included in the canon of scripture. In reality our theology today is a weaving together of the differing perspectives of the gospels and it is not always as unified as we might think.

Within the Hebrew Scriptures, there is a much wider diversity of perspectives. It is possible to find passages that are quite contradictory. Though we can find support for the possibility of being saved by our actions that is not the only perspective.

Saint Paul turns to the Hebrew Scriptures in the light of his absolute faith in the revelation of God in the life of Christ. In this light Saint Paul is drawing out passages that may not have been considered central by those who saw the actions of Abram as being what had led to his blessing, rather than it being his faith that had led to the blessing. Yet, there they are for Paul to draw on in his arguments.

There is a strong element in the Hebrew Scriptures that suggests that if we are obedient to God then we will be rewarded. I have noted before that this is a form of the prosperity gospel. In the life of Judah it is turned on its head when they are invaded by the Babylonians after their most faithful King's reign. The Hebrew Scriptures blame either the king or the people but that is not the only option.

Paul makes it clear that we cannot earn anything from God, we will never be good enough. This knowledge has been there throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. Unfortunately, most of the time no one wants to hear it or believe it.

It is hard to think that we are never good enough to meet God's standards. Yet, that is the reality for all of us. Hopefully, we get a little better year by year but all of us fall short of our full potential. Saint Paul assures us that does not matter, we are saved by our faith not by our works. That does not mean that we don't try to be more Christ like, to reveal the gospel to others, but the gift of fullness of life is always that, a gift.

In case you are feeling that is all very well but what has Abram got to do with us. Well Saint Paul covered that off too in the part of the passage we skipped over. Abram was counted righteous before he was circumcised, he was not under the law. Saint Paul wanted to assure us that Abram is the archetype for all of us and not just for those of Hebrew birth.

Even after reading a lengthy commentary on this passage, I find Saint Paul's logic unconvincing. Nonetheless, the passion with which Paul argues reminds us of his absolute faith in Christ.

The church has spent hundreds of years arguing about our beliefs and making them ever more complicated. Yet, it is clear that Saint Paul and other New Testament writers were working out their theology for their context. They were finding the arguments that would convince their peers.

If we are radical and return to the New Testament, what are the arguments that would convince people today. For the most part, I don't think many people will find our theology particularly convincing, it involves too many assumptions that they do not share with us. So I would like to put our reading from John in its fuller context. Had we read to the end of the paragraph we would have read:

²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

And had we read to the end of the section,

³⁶ Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath.

By faith we can be born of the Spirit that is allow God to work in us and so become children of light. Some will turn away from that light, perhaps even attack the light. However, those who are truly seeking will see the light and be drawn to the light. Our faith is as simple, and as complicated, as that. Our faith will transform us as we allow God to work in and through us. We will step by step become more Christ like and more clearly made in the image of God for all to see.

May we walk in the light so that God may bless us and bless the world through us. Amen. Amen.