

Readings and Sermons for Second Sunday in Lent

4th March 2012

Readings

Genesis 17.1-7,15-16

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. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.' Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, 'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 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. 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.' God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 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.'

Romans 4.13-25

The promise that Abraham would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. 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, as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations') Abraham believed in the presence of the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. 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.' 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. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith 'was reckoned to him as righteousness.' Now the words, 'it was reckoned to him,' were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in God who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Mark 8.31-38

Jesus began to teach his disciples 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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 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. '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. 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? 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.'

Rev'd Canon Simon Moor – Sunday Eucharist

Jesus said, "You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." (Mark 8:33b)

I've just completed reading my second Ken Follett book in as many months. The first, on recommendation of my father-in-law, was Pillars of the Earth. It is the story, set within the historical figures of King Stephen, Empress Maud, her son Henry II and Thomas Beckett. The main plot is the building of a cathedral by Tom the Builder and his step-son Jack—for a monk called Prior Philip. The story sets these fictitious characters within the war and turmoil of the 12th century and the struggle for the English Crown.

At the end of the book Prior Philip on a mission to Canterbury and becomes entrenched in the murder of Archbishop Thomas Becket by the knights of Henry II. Prior Philip urges the Archbishop to bolt and bar the cathedral doors, he tries to protect and steer him to safety, but Thomas Becket make a conscious choice, for this sometimes unholy primate, the choice is between self-sacrifice or self-preservation.

Four knights are approaching Canterbury Cathedral to make Becket recant his stand against the king. Henry had asked "Who will rid me of this troublesome priest" and the Four Knight (and in Follett's story one is long standing evil character) are willing to duly oblige. The outcome for Thomas Becket we know is death.

For Becket is the Christ figure in the story, an allegory to be found in many books and films—in other words Becket chose to think in God's way, not in a human way. He chose to take the way of the cross.

In our Gospel reading last week, Jesus was baptised by John and a voice from heaven, the voice of God, declared that Jesus was "my Son, the Beloved". After this calling and beautiful naming, Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness. Mark doesn't go into details but Jesus then is alone to work out the implications of this revealed identity and how to live out that identity in accordance with God's will.

Matthew and Luke give the detail of that outworking:-

The temptation is for Jesus to make himself a Messiah of miracles and dramatic signs.

For Jesus to accomplish feats that prove to everyone and anyone that God is his protection.

For Jesus to take for himself kingship and power over the entire known world.

We heard how Jesus met each of these temptations in turn and more importantly holds to his commitment to do things God's way and not his own.

This week the disciples of Jesus face a similar pattern of events. Peter has just made his declaration of Jesus being the Messiah. His voice echoes the voice of God claiming Jesus as his Son, the Beloved. Jesus then teaches the disciples what he understands the role of the Messiah to be. This understanding he reached through his wilderness experience, his personal struggle with temptation. This is where Peter and Jesus differ; Peter has not gone through this process of discernment.

For Peter it is quite inconceivable that God's Anointed One should suffer and die. This future goes against everything he had believed about the Messiah. Are we any different to Peter, it is no easier for us to understand the strange form that God's victory takes. And Peter's voice echoes the voice

of the tempter in the wilderness. Jesus once again hears that voice disguised in the voice of a friend. Hearing Peter pleading is perhaps much more difficult to resist.

See the repetition of the story, Jesus again turns on the one he calls 'Satan', the 'accuser'. As in the wilderness Jesus insists that it is the things of God, the divine things, which must come first, not self-interest and worldly concerns.

Then Jesus has to explain to his disciples, and to us, what it will cost to follow him and to try to live like him. Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me." What Thomas Becket was to do eventually after a life long struggle.

Repeating something of what Marion said last week in Lent we tend to think that "denying ourselves" is something to do with giving up things we enjoy, be it wine, chocolates, music, dancing or television. Or we might even think of it as some kind of punishment for our sins. There is though a different way of understanding Lent. We don't know what form the "accuser" took when Jesus was in the wilderness, but it clearly was something Jesus recognised as being in opposition to God. In our Gospel reading it's the voice of Peter that tries to pull Jesus away from his intended path.

Now Jesus is saying to those around him, and to us, that if we're serious about following him we are going to have to resist our own inner voice which tries to distract us. Perhaps our weaknesses lie in enjoying gossip, hearing and passing on rumours; making judgements without knowing the whole story; reacting with impatience when we're inconvenienced in some way or breaking rules for our own advantage. We each have our very own temptations and failures and these are what we need to deny ourselves; the things we need to recognise and bring to God asking for forgiveness, healing and the grace to begin again.

Jesus' message is that having everything we want and having everything going our way is worthless if in achieving that we have sacrificed our integrity, our honesty and our identity as God's beloved child in whom he is well pleased. Similarly the message is that even if our lives in worldly terms seem lacking in achievement, possessions, or status, if we still have our integrity, are being our true selves and following what we believe to be God's will for us, then we have a life caught up in divinity and in the eternal kingdom of God.