

Lent 2
24/2/2013

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Psalm 27

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Luke 13:31-35

Abraham believed the Lord and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness

The symbolism of the journey is rich and universal to many cultures. We see it in the Lord of the Rings, the Hobbit and Ulysses. In biblical story it is there in Abraham, Moses and Jesus. The text from Genesis deals with a crucial aspect of Abraham's journey, and the Gospel reading is taken from a long section, which begins when in Luke 9 Jesus resolutely sets his face to go to Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets.

There are two ways to travel. As a searcher in quest of something that is yet to be obtained, or as one who is already in receipt of a promise which points forward to a goal laid up. The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas wrote of an archetypal difference between Abraham and Ulysses. Abraham and Sarah leave Ur of the Chaldees on the basis of trust in an open-ended promise made by God, whom they have only begun to know. They are pilgrims on the way to a promised goal, which does not depend on anything but their belief in God. Ulysses leaves home on a journey - a quest - that he survives through wit and luck.

The story of Abraham and Sarah is the oldest statement of the Abrahamic faith. A sense of awe is appropriate when we encounter this story, which has become foundational for Paul in his teaching of justification by faith.

(I owe many of the ideas in this section of the sermon to Walter Brueggemann's, *Genesis*.)

Abraham and Sarah were in a situation of barrenness when God called them to their pilgrimage. As an aged, barren couple they were promised descendants as countless as the stars, and land and blessing: none of which they had any hope of obtaining in their own strength. Abraham and Sarah are the forebears of our faith for no other reason than this: despite their doubts, their cynicism, their resistance and the hopelessness of their situation, they believed God, and embraced the promise made to them. They were called out of barrenness to live as creatures of life and hope in a lifeless situation.

In the dialogue between God and Abraham there is nothing that amounts to persuasion. There is no new data about the world. We are not told Abraham suddenly caught sight of Sarah in a new way and felt a sudden, unfamiliar stirring! Even the stars are only a tool to lead him beyond - to the awesome awareness that God is God who over against it all forms of symbolic and real death provides entirely new possibilities for the future.

There is nothing speculative in this passage. God is not a hypothesis; a philosophical concept of “the good”. God is the promise maker around whose voice Abraham and Sarah’s future life is organised. This means they show themselves willing to live on a completely different basis than before. This did not amount to a simple belief that “everything will be OK!” There was nothing they could see, touch, or measure in the world that led to their decision. They travelled forward specifically because of a promise that cut right across their current context. In the middle of their barrenness they said yes to a voice that called them to life. They stand out for us because they were able to let go of their depleted circumstances and enter into the beginning of a wondrous new future.

As the church faces what it means to be faithful in a post-Christian society, there are some things for us to take note of here. Abraham and Sarah were able to do this because grace touched them: the word of God reached out to them. Their faith was not a good idea they came up with; it was not concept carefully worked out in the eventide of their life. There was a response to the initiative of grace. We can’t explain what that was. We can only see that as a result, for them, nothing was the same again.

Despite the wonder of the twinkling stars, this revelation did not come through a blaze of clarifying light. It involved passing through a terrifying darkness, much like that which Adam endured before Eve was brought forth. We see this darkness in verses left out of the reading in which Abraham learns in a dream of the terrible story of the 400 years slavery his progeny will endure in Egypt. This is probably a later insertion in the text, but what it means is that while the history of Abraham’s descendants will include deep darkness, yet God’s promise will endure. As the church endures the cultural pressures of our time, there is something for us to get hold of here.

At the outset there is talk of a reward if Abraham is willing to believe God and live over and against barrenness. The reward spoken of here is not a “wage” for services rendered. It is not the case that God offers a bargain or bribe. God does not say: ‘If you will, then I will...’ God says “I will, therefore you can...” Something of the reward comes first: in the form of the promise. It is this that sets Abraham and Sarah free to travel. They were as Paul says, like those who have nothing, and yet have everything. They have God, and what they have cannot be taken away from them.

On his journey towards Jerusalem Jesus, who is cast as a prophet who heals and casts out enslaving spirits, is the one in whom the Kingdom – the new regime of God - is breaking in. His progress unseats the powers of darkness and puts them to flight. There is a link between this and Jesus’ intentions for Jerusalem, which are generous, warm and nurturing. He manifests the persistent, patient love of God who continues to yearn for a holy people and comes in search of them to gather them in, despite their fickle resistance. Jesus knows the other side of Jerusalem, the holy city *that kills the prophets*, yet here, and again in Luke 19, he is pictured lamenting and weeping over the city.

In our reading the talk of Jesus' three days work evokes the great three days of Easter, in which he continues to manifest the warm acceptance reflected in the reading today. It is in Luke that, at the end, Jesus cries, "forgive them, they know not what they do", and just before he dies says to the thief: "today you will be with me in paradise." In amongst the unleashed power of savagery, Jesus continues to manifest not the cunning of the fox or the cruelty of wild beasts, but the guile-less, enfolding warmth of the hen amongst those who *were not willing* to receive his gift.

In Lent we journey to Jerusalem to travel again through the heartland of our story as church. At the end of this journey, from terrifying darkness the amazing grace of God bursts forth to challenge us to live *against the barrenness of death in all its forms*. For the darkness is not dark to God, and what we fear, God calls holy ground.

That we are able to revisit this story each year as we do means that for us, there is yet time to renew our trust in the promise. God is, after all, not one who seeks to punish us. God longs to gather us in as a hen lovingly gathers her chicks. Today, as you hear this, this is another opportunity to renew our yes, to this warm and loving, wondrous, initiative of grace.
