



Second Sunday of Lent

24th February 2013

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

The second Sunday in Lent is a good time for us to pause and note down our experience of Lent, share it, think about it and talk about it. It does not need to be well articulated or stunningly clever; and for some of us it will be a jumble of seemingly disconnected feelings, encounters, events and maybe even moments of clarity. As we pause, we might also be mindful of the trap of seeking to accomplish an orthodox Lent, and acknowledge that more fish and less chocolate is not necessarily the best spiritual discipline, although we seem to need some sort of spiritual discipline to give shape and scope to our Lenten journey. The Lent readings give us such a guide and a road map to help us understand our forty-day journey; they also invite us to prepare for Easter. So as we pause, we might also consider our Easter expectations and anticipations.

Our theological graffiti wall on the south side of the hall provides us with an illustration of our lent-in-progress. The stylised image of Church & Community is still very much central and serves to draw our attention. The Christmas star is still to be found, even though we've entered a new season and embarked on a journey to take us beyond Christmas. The snake which appeared to herald the new year, the Chinese year of the snake, and so an icon of the passing of time, evokes also the voice of creation that called humanity beyond the confines of Eden, a calling that voiced a truth for all peoples; "*you will be like God*". And then there is a tree starting to take shape, maybe a stunted tree, maybe a tree in the process of growing; it is yet to be more clearly defined. The tree already bears fruit, not fully grown but already holding apples. Again we find echoes of Eden, of good and evil, and for those holding on to their Sunday school orthodoxy, a symbol of temptation. Do these symbols illuminate the inner landscape of your own Lent journey? And what other symbols have been evoked as you look through the list of your Lent experience?

By the time we get to the second Sunday of Lent we might well have already travelled through fields of despair, encountered disillusionment, found discouragement and anticipated or even embraced disappointment. In the darkness of our wilderness we might even have opened the door to depression. Even the spectators of Lent are probably experiencing disquiet as their denial of movement is clouded by the dulling of our liturgical expression.

The Second Sunday of Lent might well be for all of us a D-Day! Despair, disillusionment, discouragement, disappointment, darkness, depression, disquiet, denial; all these experiences seem to be part of the wilderness we enter when we come into Lent. And so, "How good Lord to be here", to discover in today's first reading an affirming vision:
"Do not be afraid, [Abram], I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."

Abram, Abraham, is an important figure in the Christian, Muslim and Hebrew traditions, and so a universal icon that speaks beyond any one tradition, beyond any orthodox proscription; a voice, a Word, that seeks to be heard and realised by all. "*Do not be afraid, [Abram], I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.*" The word calls us into the paradigm of abundance as we encounter the smallness and scarcity of our own Lenten world.

The dialogue between God and Abram is echoed in the snake and the church, the time and the place depicted on our graffiti wall. Time is running out for Abram, he sees no further than his own mortality. Death will come and that will be the end; his is a world shaped by his own perception of life's scarcity. Abram fears also the very place where he stands; he fears his own belonging and is insecure about his place, his home in the world. And the Divine utters an affirmation and opens up for Abram a new vision:

"Do not be afraid, [Abram], I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."

Abram is assured of life's abundance, descendants like the stars of the heavens; and is also assured of the abundance of where he is, a land so vast that it stretches beyond the horizon of his imagination.

What is really helpful for us today is that Abram's discovery came from his own D-Day, he also was in the 'second Sunday of Lent' experience. The reading speaks of a "deep sleep", and of a "deep and terrifying darkness" that "descended" and of a time when "the sun had gone down". From this place, the voice of tomorrow, the voice of Easter is heard; *"Do not be afraid, [Abram], I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."* This Divine vision, is voiced as a covenant, a lasting truth that is given to each, and to all; and therefore to us.

When we pause and look through the list of our Lent experience, when we confront the D-Day of our own wilderness, we might also hold to the truth that the psalmist utters; *"I believe that I shall surely see the goodness of the Lord: in the land of the living"*, for that is the very truth of Easter's realisation. It is an important truth for us to fully appreciate, and that means some unpacking of the second reading.

Paul tells us that we do not belong here, for *"our citizenship is in heaven"*. And he goes on to say *"it is from there [heaven] that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ"*. In a simplistic or primitive understanding this, and other such texts, put off the reality of abundance to the afterlife and delay any realisation of the covenant given to Abram, and to us, until the second coming of Christ. However, Paul's insight holds a much deeper truth when the whole of time is brought into the present moment. The covenant vision gives to Abram, and to us, an appreciation of abundance in the present; it offers us a worldview that differs from the worldly paradigm of scarcity. We can choose either one as the place we will inhabit today, the cup is both half empty and half full. Paul is encouraging us to 'be' heaven's citizens now, he urges us to *"stand firm in the Lord"*.

It is the same trust that is known by the psalmist: *"I believe that I shall surely see the goodness of the Lord: in the land of the living"*; and the same trust that Abram found in his becoming Abraham; his D-day took him beyond his small self into a place of being that imitated Christ; he became a citizen of heaven, for him abundance was realised. Yes, we are expecting a Saviour from heaven, and yes, we have seen that revealed in and through Jesus Christ. What was also revealed is that *"the Kingdom of Heaven is near"*, and so expectation and revelation can only be realised in ourselves, and ourselves living the mystery of Easter.

One of the delights of today, the Second Sunday of Lent, is that we still have time. Our journey is not yet half way complete, and that is further affirmed in the gospel parable. How the gospel writer knew that we would have the image of a tree on our graffiti wall is still a mystery to me. In Luke's gospel today, we have Jesus answering questions about sin, which was clearly misunderstood by those asking the questions. He takes the opportunity to give an insight into life's abundance, life lived beyond the sin of scarcity, and lived in bearing the

fruits of abundance. The parable of the tree puts the future into the hands of the gardener, the one who tills the soil, the one who lives beyond Eden. That's us! And the gardener's response is to give - give time and effort into bringing about fruitfulness.

With an eye on Easter, I propose that following our Easter celebration we ask that no one comes to Church. It will take the rest of Lent to more fully craft such an ask. The ask needs to be made with absolute clarity, and it is the ask of Easter itself: do not come to church, rather become church. We are the gardeners of tomorrow bearing fruit.

Ponder such an ask as you stay with the journey of Lent, and encounter your own D-Day, we have time: *O wait for the Lord; stand firm and he will strengthen your heart: and wait, I say, for the Lord.*

Peter Humphris