

Second Sunday in Lent 12th March 2017

[Deut 10: 12-22; Psalm 119: 1-9; 1 Cor 3: 1-9; Matthew 5:21-27](#) from Vanderbilt

[Lent 2 A March 12 2017](#) Textweek

Last week for the first Sunday in Lent we looked at the story of Adam and Eve, and now for the Second Sunday of Lent we have the Character of Abraham, or at this stage in the text Abram.

Once again we might appreciate that rather than historic figures we are looking at iconic figures, and although the texts were written in the context of the history of the 'People of Israel', who saw themselves as God's chosen; they can certainly be more fully appreciated when we understand that all are God's 'chosen' people.

These iconic or archetypal stories provide us with an opportunity to reflect on our formation and foundations both as reflections of humanity and also as reflections of ourselves as individuals.

Adam and Eve open us to a mindfulness of our Divine birth and now through the character of Abram we are invited to bring faith into focus.

Although we have a really short passage from the overall Abraham story, it's brevity makes it very clear that in the Character of Abram we are looking at another 'creation narrative'; the seven days backdrop to Adam and Even is now echoed in a sevenfold blessing that is given to Abram:

I will make of you a great nation,
and I will bless you,
and make your name great,
so that you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and the one who curses you I will curse;
and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

The sevenfold blessing is not so much about the individual components of the blessing, but like the seven days of creation and the seven chakras of Eastern traditions it speaks of wholeness; Abram receives the fullness, and the whole of God's blessing.

And as we hear in the final part of that blessing;
"in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed",
we too receive the full and whole Divine Blessing.

If we follow the unfolding of Abram's story so we follow a thread that is foundational to all the 'Abrahamic religions' for the person of Abraham plays a prominent role as an example of faith in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

However, with today's short extract from the story and with the reference of the second reading we are really only being asked to look at one foundational quality, that of "faith".

And it is it a helpful focus for us in the wilderness of Lent, for surely that is exactly where we encounter questions of 'faith'.

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Before we look a little more closely at what these two readings illustrate for us, we'll just consider the character of Nicodemus for again he is helpful in illustrating the process we find ourselves in during Lent.

A "*Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews*"; he represents the well-educated and the faithful; he is like us; and like us he sees in Jesus someone who is "*from God*".

The gospel gives us an interesting dialogue, for Nicodemus does not initially ask any question, rather in approaching and recognising Jesus he is given some new understanding.

And perhaps that's enough for us to start with as we spend time with our own Lent encounters. Nicodemus approaches Jesus in the dark; "*He came to Jesus by night*", he is not attending Church, not meeting Jesus in the everyday, rather in the wilderness of darkness.

What we might see in the gospel is an encouragement for us to contemplate these stories in the depth of our prayers and without the familiar reference points of our knowing.

And so going back to Abraham leaving behind the knowing of the character as one of the 'founding fathers' of our faith; we might see a very simple understanding of 'faith'.

This is a story from before the receiving of the ten commandments, a story from before having to be circumcised, and a story from before the other 613 laws contained in the Old Testament books; it is a story of a starting point that perhaps most of us have missed, for most of us have been brought up 'under the law'.

What it reveals, and what Paul is reflecting on in the second reading is that faith is not an acquisition, it is not something we practice and it is not something that results from doing good works; rather it is a given when we recognise the fullness of blessing that we have all received.

It leaves no room for us and them, for all are blessed;

"in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

And so the only distinction is found in what we can recognise for ourselves; when we see or acknowledge the blessing that is our wholeness, the blessing that echoes our creation, then we can move into a new and promising landscape.

Paul of all people must have wrestled with this new understanding: and yet he concludes;

“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, 17 as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations") -- in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”

Now the crunch comes, and this is perhaps the reality of our time in the wilderness; do we actually want to enter a new landscape or are we comfortable in the landscape we inhabit.

Faith took Abram into a new place:

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.”

The unfolding story is of course very geographical, but really we are looking at a movement that is beyond ‘place’, we are looking at a new order of living that is beyond the confines of all that is familiar.

Even Paul perhaps glimpses the enormity for he speaks of a faith in the one

“who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”

In the second week of Lent we can almost feel the temperature of the readings being turned up; for the very roots of our faith are being exposed. If we thought last Sunday that we could hide ourselves behind a fig leaf that is no longer the case this week.

Today and in the week ahead our contemplation of faith takes us away from the laws of our tradition, beyond the walls of the Church and the Hymns of our fathers, beyond the liturgical calendar and the rhythm of well-known prayers.

We go into a place where we might seek an encounter with Jesus in the dark; a place where our only truth is the blessing bestowed on Abram.

The Psalm today gives a good example of such an encounter; notice that the first two verses are spoken in the first person(singular, subjective), this is our voice in prayer, our voice as we give voice to our prayers:

“1 I lift up my eyes to the hills-- from where will my help come?

2 My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.”

But where did the rest of Psalm come from, for that is a different voice in the second-person;

“The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand.”

Whose voice is it, it is the voice that blessed Abram, and the voice we seek to hear in the wilderness of Lent, for it is the voice that blesses each and all of us and when heard, it can lead us into the landscape of faith: a place that *gives*

“life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”

Peter Humphris