Sermon for 14th in Ordinary Year A

Readings: Genesis 24: 34-38, 42-49,58-67; Romans 7: 15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19,25-30

i

They can teach you how to lift heavy weights. It’s all about bending the knees and straightening the back. But what about life’s non-physical burdens that we all have to carry through life? Who teaches you to lift those? We all gather responsibilities and liabilities as we progress through life: finding a job, maintaining a marriage, raising children, caring for elderly parents, supporting weak and vulnerable members of society, dealing with our own failures at work, in relationships, or as citizens. There are good, bad and apparently pointless bits in every life; can any sense be made of it? Can any meaningful story be made from the haphazard collection of episodes and events that make up our stories?

The great and the good of our history books are not immune from lives that are broken and compromised through failure, poor choices or the happenstance of circumstances in which they are caught up. Everyone has bits of life they would rather forget. Abraham may be one of the great heroes of the Bible, but even he is not immune from the vicissitudes of living.

Abraham left a thriving city of Haran to follow a God he could not name to a country that was already occupied, soon to be caught in a cruel famine which forced him to go begging for shelter in Egypt, passing his wife Sarah off as his sister – presumably so that he would be treated well by Pharaoh who would want to bribe Abraham to let him marry her, rather than making it obvious from the start that the only way Pharaoh could possess Sarah was by killing Abraham.

This plan worked for a while and secured Abraham and his people favourable treatment as refugees, but it very nearly cost Sarah dearly when Pharaoh decided he did want to marry her. Fortunately, God came to the rescue and struck Pharaoh down with a plague, making Pharaoh rush to escort Abraham and his people back over the border and out of Egypt.

Abraham then has a rather less than salubrious episode with Hagar, a concubine, and Ishmael the son they have together. Abraham’s action looks particularly questionable in today’s light, but it must have raised questions about ethical standards even in the most patriarchal of societies. It appears to suggest that Abraham had lost patience in waiting for God to provide the son he promised and so took steps to remedy the situation himself. Once God eventually fulfilled his promise with the gift of Isaac, poor Hagar and Ishmael were surplus to requirements.

Abraham also cedes the better land to Lot, rather than taking it for himself (Gen 13:10). Upon the death of Sarah, Abraham takes another wife, Keturah (Gen 25:1). Some Jewish traditions, particularly later rabbinic Judaism, interpret Keturah to be a new name given to Hagar, thus rounding off that loose end in Abraham’s life with a measure of resolution, but evidence for this is patchy, to say the least. But it’s a nice idea.

In today’s passage from Genesis 24, Abraham’s servant is led across the desert to find a suitable kinswoman to become Isaac’s wife. God leads him to Rebekah. Providence was at work again.

Only divine love makes sense of Abraham’s life. Without a suitable wife for Isaac, the whole of Abraham’s life falls apart. The gift of Isaac, remarkable though that was, becomes meaningless if Isaac cannot find a suitable wife to carry the story on towards its fulfilment.

Failures, poor decisions, difficult circumstances – these are the things that make up our lives, but God is like a master craftsman who picks up the apparently random events of our lives, its ugliness and its pain as well as its moments of beauty and achievement, and puts the pieces together like a craftsman who takes up the insignificant pieces of pottery to create a wonderful mosaic.

ii

Not all lives wish to be redeemed. Not all lives do paint a meaningful picture. We see an example of this in our passage from Matthew 11. Providence acts in mysterious harmony with those who commit themselves to faithful obedience, taking up the good, the bad and the pointless in life to create a meaningful whole. But human freedom can reject the work of the master craftsman.

Jesus expresses his exasperation that stubborn people were looking for any excuse to dismiss the call of God into the new kingdom. Some complained that the Baptist had been too austere, but then they complained that Jesus wasn’t austere enough. This is just a wilful desire to find some pretext or other for ignoring the call of God.

In verses 20-24 Jesus laments the fact that the miracles he has performed in his home district of Galilee have failed to produce a response. Even the pagan cities of Tyre and Sidon would have shown more interest.

This is a turning point in the ministry of Jesus. The original impact has worn off. The crowds may still be around, but they either want only their own needs fulfilled, such as healing (Mark 1:32-39), or they are hoping for an armed rebellion (John 6:15) or even they are just enjoying the ease of getting a free meal (John 6:26).

The religious elite particularly are failing to respond to him. But those who have open ears, hearts and minds are finding a new and liberating truth in Jesus. People do not have to be experts; truth comes not to those who consider themselves wise, but to those who remain open to the Holy Spirit.

Jesus will reveal to simple, faithful souls the secrets of the kingdom. Those who receive the truth that Jesus alone imparts find that life’s burdens are eased. The yoke that Jesus fashions for his followers is far easier to bear than the yoke of the Scribes and Pharisees. Burdens are not removed. No promises are made that life will be without its troubles for those who follow Jesus, but the promise is quite clear that Jesus enables life’s burdens to be borne much more easily, that with Jesus the brokenness of life can be made whole.

iii

St Paul serves as a great example of someone whose life was broken apart in order to be remodelled by Christ into a new and better thing than it was before. Paul considered himself a theological expert and appointed himself to be God’s enforcer as he offered himself to chase down the Christians in the cities beyond Jerusalem.

Yet even after his dramatic conversion, Paul remains compromised with sin. Paul’s life is still full of contradictions and wrong choices. Even after his conversion, Paul still struggles to yield his life fully to the Spirit (Rom 7:15). He confesses that he does the sinful thing he doesn’t want to do, and fails to do the good thing he does wish to do. His mortal flesh is still prone to weakness and sin, despite his intentions. His mind is fully committed to Christ, but his mortal body will not permit him to leave sin behind.

The good news is that Jesus has broken the power of sin on Paul’s behalf. By baptism into Christ, Paul can share the victory over mortal sin that Christ has won. Once again, the brokenness of life can be put back together by Christ. The burden of sin is not taken away, but it is greatly reduced, for the load is shared by Christ.

This is surely the good news which we need to hear today. We are all conscious of the way in which our lives are still spoilt by sinful attitudes and deeds, by plain errors of judgement and by the actions of others. Despite our commitment to Jesus we too remain compromised by our mortal weakness. We continue to struggle with sin and fail to live up to the good we dream of doing. The Church is a mess and we are responsible.

This is exactly how it was for St Paul. Yet God still used him and made sense of his life and brought a beautiful meaning out of the brokenness, failure and sin to bequeath a life of a saint. If great lives such as those of Abraham and Paul are less than perfect, and yet made meaningful and good by the grace of God, that gives hope to me when I consider my failures and shortcomings and helps me keep on the path of discipleship despite the disappointing progress I make through my human weakness.

Wesley’s talk of ‘Christian Perfection’ was a rallying cry to call people to greater efforts. At first, Wesley probably did go too far and encourage a belief that total freedom from sin was attainable in this life. It wasn’t long before he adopted a more mature and realistic view. He later expelled some of those who caused trouble by claiming such sinless, untainted perfection.

Wesley’s later more mature formulation of his doctrine was that ‘Christian Perfection’ was designed to rouse those living in spiritual torpor, who took refuge in the fact that even Paul and the great saints continued to wrestle with sin. Wesley didn’t want lukewarm Christians who were happy to coast along, relying on Christ to deal with sin, so that that they could remain worldly and self-indulgent.

Wesley’s ‘Christian Perfection’ was a necessary reminder to the serious Christian believer that the grace of Christ is not to be used as an excuse for making no effort. By grace, the master craftsman will assemble the tesserae of our lives into a beautiful mosaic, but it is still our duty to make sure God has at least some fragments of goodness, beauty and faith at his disposal.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

**August 2016**