Sermon for 2nd in Lent Year C

Readings: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

i

Today we have one of the strangest stories in the Bible, the account of Abraham cutting animals in half for God to walk through the middle. This is accompanied by Jesus likening himself to a mother hen and Paul consigning to hell those who make their belly into God. It may not be immediately clear why the Lectionary thinks they belong together, but we shall try and fathom that out together.

Let us begin with Abraham, or more correctly at that stage, Abram in Genesis 15. This story is part of the inauguration of the covenant relationship with God which culminates in Abram receiving circumcision and the birth of a son. Abram, meaning, “father of height” also receives the name, Abraham, meaning, “father of many nations”.

The relationship with God contains wonderful promises to come in the future – a land to call his own and a progeny as numerous as the stars in heaven. In such a society in which land and children and descendants are crucial forms of accruing honour and status, these promises are so rich as to be well-nigh overwhelming.

Yet there is a cost involved. It is a significant cost that is best symbolised by the offering of blood – hence the sacrifice of the animals – and also perhaps the significance of the blood that is inevitably part of the circumcision ritual.

In order for Abraham to reach the fulfilment of God’s promises, Abraham has to leave behind the safety and prosperity of Haran which was as far as his father Terah managed, and go on into the unknown, trusting God, not even aware which land was to be his, nor how he could ever become a father of a mighty nation at his and Sarah’s great ages.

Abraham received his son and his land, but only after the ignominy of begging for food in Egypt and having to pass Sarah off as his sister, possibly she had to make herself available for an Egyptian harem.

However, the pattern has been established. Great rewards await those who trust God, but those rewards only come to those who remain faithful through the most severe testing.

ii

It is immediately apparent how such a scheme of great rewards bestowed only upon those who remain faithful to the end fits in with Jesus’ tears for Jerusalem.

The passage from Luke 13:31-35 opens with Jesus being ushered out of his native Galilee by threats from Herod who ruled the Galilee and Peraea regions (Jerusalem was under the authority of a Roman governor – Pontius Pilate at the time).

Are the Pharisees being supportive of Jesus and trying to help him escape Herod, or are they just as pleased as Herod will be if Jesus moves on and gets out of their territory? Herod will catch up with Jesus when he comes to Jerusalem for Passover.

The wording of Jesus’ reply to Herod’s threats that he will finish his work on the “third day” seems to be a deliberate allusion to the forthcoming Resurrection on the third day.

Jesus therefore speaks of meeting his death in Jerusalem – like so many prophets before him.

This is that same Abrahamic scheme again: the new life, the fulfilment of Christ’s mission on the third day, comes only after the cross: Great reward, but a great price too, paid in blood.

Jesus uses a very maternal image of himself as he likens himself to a mother hen wanting to save her chicks.

Jesus is no warrior king. He does not wish to coerce people to follow. He comes for the sake of those who reject him. He wants the best for them and for the world. He is the fulfilment of that long-awaited promise to Abraham – for now in Christ – Abraham’s children by faith shall inhabit the whole earth and shall be as numerous as the stars above – and the citizens of Jerusalem will miss out! What a tragedy!

Those who reject him are stuck in their reliance upon their old ways. They will not move on in faith out into the unknown to find in Christ a new and greater land, a new and greater living temple, a new and greater life granted on the third day.

iii

Paul is dealing in Philippi with some people who are also failing to move on in faith.

In general, Paul was delighted with the Philippian church as his words of praise in today’s passage exemplify, but there were some divisions and the tension between Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2) is one example.

Whatever the details, Paul feels the need to urge at least some at Philippi to maintain the faith and to finish the race that lies ahead.

Paul pleads with them to follow his example, but what does he mean by this?

It is thought that most of the converts in Philippi were Gentile Christians and also Roman citizens. Indeed there would be many religions in Philippi at the time, Thracian gods Liber Pater and Bendis, Athena of the Greeks, Jupiter and Mars of Roman tradition and the cult of the Emperor.

In Philippi even Judaism may have been so tiny that it was deemed a foreign cult and therefore had to be practised outside the city boundaries where Paul met with Lydia on his first visit to the city.

So the best reading we can take of Paul’s instruction that the Philippian Christians should follow his example might well be to understand that Paul was urging his followers to be fully committed to Christ in the way he had broken with his past Judaism, which in comparison to the Gospel he now sees as “rubbish” (Phil 3:8).

Paul has broken away from the spiritual comforts of his past when he was a committed Pharisee and they should do the same. Perhaps there was a tendency among some to back two horses and try to follow Christ whilst also practising their former religion just in case!

Outward conformism to the Gospel is of no consequence. What matters is the disposition of the heart.

This was Wesley’s understanding too; he did not think belonging to the right church, whatever one considered that to be, was a guarantee of salvation. Wesley acknowledged the true faith of people from any church background, even a Catholic background – a surprisingly broad compass for his day – who were seeking to live a life of holiness.

His Methodist societies were established to support people in their search to grow in holiness. This was for Wesley the only reliable sign of the New Birth. It was a view that upset many gentlefolk in their pallid social conformity to parish life.

Those in Philippi, who have made their belly into a god, or as it is translated in modern versions, have made their bodily desires their god, may well be Paul’s description of those who desire to keep all their social status, privileges and securities by keeping up their old pagan religion alongside their commitment to Christ.

This is not the life of the Cross - indeed they have become the very enemy of such a Christian life.

Paul weeps over these lost, compromised souls in the same way as Christ weeps over Jerusalem.

As we have seen, the Abrahamic covenant offers manifold future rewards, but only after testing and potential suffering here on earth. It may be tempting to avoid such a painful path, but Paul believes they risk losing everything.

Paul says we should conduct our earthly lives not to reap worldly rewards, but future heavenly ones. We are citizens of a heavenly kingdom now, so our earthly citizenship is no longer the primary and defining relationship it once was. We have a new family, the Church, through baptism into Christ, and a new citizenship and therefore we should live according to that kingdom’s rules.

Why dedicate your lives to worldly rewards, asks Paul, when our earthly existence is destined to die.

The stakes cannot be higher – this is about life itself – this is about eternal choices. A Church that no longer weeps for those that do not believe is a Church that no longer expects there is much to be lost or gained either way. That belief may save us a few tears today and make the Christian path an easier road, but we might find such a road leads to nowhere and then we’ll know what tears really are.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard April 2015**