

The Second Sunday of Lent 2025 (16th March)

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18, Luke 13:31-35

A Sermon by Pat Hemsley, Lay Reader

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer.

One of life's joys is a good conversation with a dear friend, often over a mug of tea or coffee, or a glass of wine; one of those conversations when you can be yourself without worrying too much about the words. It's a moment to offload grumbles, worries, uncertainties, to share joys and sorrows —and even, if the trust that exists between you is strong, to complain about the hurts caused mutually. It's a time to cry, and to laugh together, a time when listening is as important as speaking and, if all that happens well, it provides a means by which that friendship is established, nurtured and deepened. The trust which exists can be the bedrock of a lifelong relationship.

The Bible can be seen perhaps, as one long conversation between God and man, a conversation which has demonstrated the immensity of the love God has invested in the relationship, and which has encouraged mankind over the ages to reciprocate and to love and to trust God. In the Old Testament, we hear the stories of all the individuals who have done just that...Moses, Elijah, Hosea, Amos, all the prophets... and, as we read and study the New Testament and listen to the conversations between Christ and his disciples, between the disciples and those with whom they share Christ's message, we know ourselves to be marvellously invited to enter into our own personal conversations with our God.

Our first reading today from the book of Genesis, records a conversation between God and Abram, the man who has yet to become Abraham. God appears to like Abram; they're talking man to man, so that Abram feels able to whinge a little and question God about his despair in not having a son and heir. The verses preceding this passage describe how Abram had performed a service for King Melchizedek, but afterwards refused to accept anything as payment other than what was due to the men who had accompanied him. God, pleased that Abram's honesty and integrity is a vindication of his trust promises "your reward shall be very great."

Abram's reply is somewhat aggrieved. We can almost imagine him, hands on his hips, pointing out that words are very well, but what he wants more than anything is a legitimate son, to carry on his line after him. God doesn't try to fob him off with a different offer. He promises "no-one but your very own issue shall be your heir"

and, after Abram has been shown the countless numbers of stars, God continues, "so shall your descendants be.", We're told, Abram believed the Lord. The enormous compassion of God in responding to what Abram desperately wanted is matched only by Abram's trust that God will fulfil his promise.

The scriptures show that one of the abiding characteristics of God is his willingness to accept our trust in him as the equivalent of goodness, of righteousness. A prime example is, of course Jesus' response to the thief crucified alongside him, who, recognising his own sin and Jesus' true identity, is promised a place in paradise alongside Jesus. So the trust between God and Abram is sealed with a gruesome, (but of its time) ritual and the relationship thrives, even to and beyond the testing moment when the man now known as Abraham is prepared to sacrifice that beloved and much-longed for son back at God's request. For his part the ritual signifies that God has bound himself to his promise to Abram and Abram's people.... and that ancient promise will be kept centuries later, when God offers his own son for sacrifice.

The gospel reading begins with a conversation between Jesus and some Pharisees, who warn him that he has come to Herod's notice, which places his life in danger. Jesus' reply demonstrates his contempt for Herod but also shows that he has a very clear knowledge of what his path will be. He will be killed, but in God's time and place and not at the whim of a Roman puppet king. Like the prophets before him, Jesus is an integral part of God's promise to protect and nurture his people. God has remained loyal and trustworthy, but over the centuries people refused to listen, have been tempted away and in effect were "not willing" to be sheltered from all that threatened them. They had turned away from the conversation God offered.

Jesus knows his critical role in God's plan, his work of salvation for his people. As his son, Jesus is God's own commitment to what he has promised, and nothing is to deter Jesus from the necessary path to Jerusalem and the cross. Throughout all four gospels we have listened to conversations between Jesus and his Father and we have seen the extent of the trust and understanding that those dialogues bring to their relationship. We've yet one more poignant exchange to come, when in the garden, Jesus pleads to be released from his terrifying path, but is still able to say, "yet, not my will, but yours be done." In Jesus, we see both the human trust in God and the promise God has bound himself to on our behalf, as the Son of God allows himself to be slaughtered, like Abram's animals, to fulfil that promise.

Conversations, promises and trust ... what do these things say to us as we continue our Lenten journey? In Jesus, God's promise was extended to offer life; life now, life with him after death, life in abundance. He yearns for us not to turn away as did Jerusalem, but to deepen our relationship with him in the daily routines of our

lives. Perhaps as we walk with Jesus towards his cross, we're being encouraged to explore and develop our own personal conversations with God. How can that be done?

Prayer, of course, is most important and our daily mailing last Friday spoke of that. However, I'm sure God is as much there in our coffee times, our walks and our gardens, as he is in this church, or when we're on our knees in supplication. He wants to hear those moments when we punch the air and shout "yes!" for the sheer joy of living; he's there when we cry "Why him? Why her? Why me?". It's fine to share our whinges and our terrors and I'm convinced it's OK to be angry with him. Expressing these human emotions and experiences with God, and in the way we'd share with an earthly friend, is as much a part of our relationship with him as it is with those we love and trust here.

Like Abram, who longed for a son, land and an inheritance, we know how much of our security lies on earth and we can't forget about our daily needs, the things we think we want now and all the worries we have. Of course, these things feature strongly in our conversations with God. Like Teyve in the musical "Fiddler on the roof" we may well ask God, "Would it spoil some vast eternal plan if I were a wealthy man?" Our needs and desires are not ignored by God, but their fulfilment will be in God's time and to his plan, not ours. Focussing on our concerns, fears and problems may blind us to the life that God offers. Instead let's talk to God about learning what is his purpose for us, let's ask for guidance to adjust our priorities so that we can see and play our part in his bigger picture.

God loves us and we can trust him and his promises even when, especially when, things seem impossible, when life seems too hard, when the pain becomes unbearable, when doubt creeps in. We're experiencing nothing that those who have gone before also experienced. All we need to do is to converse with him, to hold on and believe, just as David the psalmist wrote thousands of years ago; "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living."

Amen