

Lent 2 John 3:1-17

Today's readings begin with the story of Abram, or Abraham as we come to know him. It is just a small excerpt from Genesis that we have but it is at the very beginning of his story with God. It doesn't really tell us much at all about how the story unfolds but it almost doesn't matter, we know this story too well.

The epistle of St Paul to the church in Rome, our second reading, also refers to Abraham in a limited and rather abstract way, speaking of Abraham's justification by faith rather than by works as Paul was preaching to all Christians, that justification by faith is how we are all saved and not by works. Like much of St Paul's writings it can be a bit tricky to decipher but that's the gist of it.

Then we come to the Gospel, no mention of Abraham here, just an encounter Jesus had with Nicodemus, a Pharisee who came to talk to Jesus by night. One can imagine that Nicodemus was in the crowds listening to Jesus preaching day by day but unable to seem too interested for fear of being ostracised by the other Pharisees, yet there was something he saw in Jesus, something he recognised and he wanted to understand better what it was he was witnessing. In this encounter Jesus introduces the concept of being born again of water and the spirit.

But why put these readings together, and put them together for Lent 2. The first 2 are a pretty good match with one another, but the gospel is something else. Well it's never an accident, the lectionary is a deliberately constructed pattern for readings and it appears that this week should have us thinking about the nature of the change we experience through faith.

Being born again is a term used by many Christian denominations to describe the moment or event where a Christian comes to know they are saved and that moment or event will cause a fundamental shift in the life of that individual. There is no going back to the old, the old is dead and the newly born individual can never again be their former self. They can repeat old behaviours, this is not a magic solution that means the person can sin no more, but as we are not justified or condemned by works but by faith, once we have received the grace of salvation we cannot lose it. That is what is understood by being born again.

But what about Abraham, he was not in any recognisable way born again by water and the spirit, neither was he under the Jewish law as St Paul reminds us, he pre-dates that. No, Abraham simply experienced a relationship with God and through his faith he was justified. The part we heard this morning tells of Abram's first real display of faith, when, at God's word, he left his father's land and stepped out by faith taking with him his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot.

Through his life Abraham continued to have a relationship with God, and he continued to get things wrong, he pretended Sarai was his sister to avoid his own death in Egypt and incurred God's anger, he had a child with Hagar the servant when he lost his nerve and

couldn't imagine how God would otherwise keep his promise to make him a father of nations. And yet God overlooked his mistakes because Abraham continued to be faithful to God, even when he wavered a bit. His life was affected by his relationship with God, when he got things wrong it was only to try to ensure God's promises came to pass. He could not undo his favour in the eyes of God simply by making mistakes.

And so it all begins to make sense in Lent. When we are trying to be introspective and self reflective, we have to look at our relationship with God and whether we are remaining faithful to it. We need to not worry too much about the mistakes we make along the way, we can make up for those, we can confess and be forgiven, we can mend damaged relationships with others and even with God. What we need to establish is, are we living lives which are justified by faith? Are we responding to our salvation appropriately? We cannot earn salvation or lose it so we needn't worry about that, but we ought to be changed by it, how are we changed by our salvation, how does it play out in our lives and in our relationships with other people?

In the Alpha course, the speaker, Nicky Gumbel, warns participants that one of the major barriers to people really coming to a committed faith rather than an airy fairy, "I believe there is something out there" or "I'm very spiritual, just not religious", is that that they have seen friends or family members become Christians and then change into quite different people.

They don't all have a born again moment or event that they can put their finger on, some grow in faith bit by bit like Abraham, learning by mistakes and deepening their acceptance of the grace of God over time, but however it happens for us, it must surely change us, shake us to our very core. There is no use stating our faith as received in the creed and the scriptures if we are going to live in the same way as we always have. Knowledge and understanding of God as revealed to us by Jesus means we must treat people differently, we cannot accept the gospels but continue to hate people, because the gospels tell us that God loves those people, they are made in his image and his kingdom would see all of humanity unified through love.

We cannot come to love God without seeing reflected in the faces of the poor and oppressed the face of Christ crucified. There is no suffering greater than his and he underwent that suffering as an innocent to bear these burdens for us, surely our faith makes us want to at least try to bear the load for one another?

We surely are unable to respond to God's overwhelming Love towards us with anything other than a radical desire for love and justice to permeate the world around us. If we are not excited by our salvation to the point where we wish to share it then perhaps we have misunderstood what it means to be saved.

These scripture passages remind us of the change that faith brings, change of attitude, change of focus, change of priorities, change of life and they are very apt for lent as we spend time reflecting on our lives and where to go next.

May you be inspired by the faith of Abraham, encouraged by the teachings of Paul and challenged by the words of Jesus to change into someone who reflects even better the salvation you have already freely received by the grace of God.