

## Lent 2 Mark 8:31-38

Today's readings begin with the story of Abraham. It is just a small excerpt from Genesis but it is at the very beginning of his story with God. It focuses on the moment God changes Abram's name to Abraham and Sarai's name to Sarah. It is the description of God choosing this family to form a covenant with and changes their names as a sign that they are changed people. You might think this happened at the beginning of Abraham's journey with God, particularly in light of Abraham's regular errors of judgement. Perhaps God made this commitment before he knew that Abraham was going to get things wrong, a lot.

Not so, this encounter occurred after Abraham had 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, 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.

Our Epistle reading from St Paul's letter to the Romans describes this covenant relationship between God and Abraham in light of the life and ministry of Jesus. St Paul clarifies to the Romans that although Abraham was the father of the Jewish faith, he was not justified to God by works or adherence to rules, rather by faith alone. Abraham pre-dates even the 10 commandments and so there was no guideline for him to follow to do the right thing, no law and as St Paul simply states, where there is no law there can be no breach of the law. Paul was, prior to his conversion, a teacher of the law, it had been all he knew and was a perfectly reasonable way to engage with God as far as he was concerned. The solution to wishing to have a relationship with the almighty was simple if not easy to do, just follow the rules, do what the law says, let your words and actions show your respect and love for God.

Of course, after his conversion the world turned upside down, this man Jesus, whose teaching had so disrupted the authority of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, turned out to have been right all along, coming to God meant living by the spirit and intent of the law and not the letter of it, because living by the letter of it built barriers between people and its intention was to bring together all of God's people in order for them to be able to live in harmony with one another. Paul was a new man, he understood God in a new way and religion was renewed also. His understanding of scripture, his in-depth knowledge of the Hebrew texts were challenged. Not by his circumcision nor by anything else he did was Abraham justified, concludes St Paul, but by his faith alone because the covenant was formed before his circumcision, and it was re-established despite his well-meaning but ultimately ungodly actions.

This is wonderful news for us, here, truly is the basis for calling our religion a Gospel religion, a good news religion, here is the good news. God chooses us, as we are, flawed, mistaken, disobedient, stubborn, and God loves us. Our actions can make him love us no more neither can they make him love us any less. Our faith in God is entirely a response to him and not an appeal to him. God's favour is unearnable. We are all equally placed in his sight because the things that separate us in the world's terms, status, wealth, education, none of this stuff matters to God. When we truly

accept that God loves us for us now, we are freed from the worry the constraints of the world brings. When we know God's favour in our lives we are changed in response to that, it is impossible not to be.

Not all of us have a born-again moment or event that we can put our finger on, some of us grow in faith bit by bit like Abraham, learning by mistakes and deepening our 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.

Our gospel reading this morning shows us what that response looks like, Jesus said if you want to follow me you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me, he warns us not to be ashamed of him or his words in front of the Godless. This season of lent is a time for taking stock and re-examining the lives we lead. We are justified by faith, sure, but that doesn't mean we can't get things wrong, you only have to look at Abraham to know that. And getting things wrong, not bothering to try is not what God's grace is for. We benefit from living lives of faith both in this life and beyond. We may not have what the world sees as important but we will know a peace in relationship with God that fills a void nothing else can.

So how are you, this lent and going forward, denying yourself, bearing a burden for God and following Jesus. It's quite a challenge, don't you think? We have heard the verse of scripture many times, we know that Jesus denied himself and took on the cross for our sakes, what will we do in response?

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.

Just a few ideas of the many types of 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.