

Readings for the Second Sunday in Lent

5th March 2023

First Reading: Genesis 12:1-4a

The LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.

Second Reading: Romans 4:1-5,13-17

What are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.' Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations') – Abraham believed in the presence of the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Gospel: St John 3:1-17

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.'

Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven,

the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.'

A Reflection for the Second Sunday in Lent

On Tuesday evening, I had a great night out! I went along to the Fairtrade fortnight event at the MacPhail Centre – with several other members of St Mary's congregation as it turned out. We watched three short films about Fairtrade, enjoyed a Fairtrade coffee, tea and chocolate tasting, and joined in a short quiz. As we were reminded, Fairtrade is about paying farmers a fair price for what they produce – and although we think about this as relating to farmers in the developing world, where they do tend to be most exploited, I think the principle applies to farmers here too. But Fairtrade is about more than just a fair price. In the developing world, farmers and workers also receive what is called a Fairtrade Premium. This is an additional sum of money which goes into a communal fund to use as they see fit to improve the social, economic and environmental conditions of their community.

You may wonder what this has to do with today's readings! Our Gospel reading introduces us to Nicodemus. Nicodemus is only named in John's Gospel, where he appears three times, today's passage being the first. We are told that he is a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews. The context within the Gospel suggests that he has seen what Jesus has been doing in Jerusalem and, although he is a Pharisee, he comes as a sincere, if cautious, enquirer. The Pharisees are generally seen as opposed to Jesus' ministry, but Nicodemus' Greek name suggests he may be part of a more open group. Later in the Gospel, when the Pharisees are trying to arrest Jesus, he speaks up, pointing out that their own law does not permit them to judge someone without first giving them a hearing. And after Jesus' death, Nicodemus brings myrrh and aloes for his burial.

In today's passage, Jesus recognises the spiritual hunger in Nicodemus, but Nicodemus fails to understand the spiritual significance of what Jesus says to him about being born again. Whilst some of us can be a bit wary about the phrase 'born again', associating it with a particular type of evangelical Christianity, we need not be. We are all 'born again' of water and the Spirit in baptism, something that would have been very recognisable to the first audience of John's Gospel, although not so clearly to Nicodemus.

When we are baptised or confirmed as a Christian, there are two aspects to the promises we make: affirmation of faith and commitment to Christian life. The two are inseparable; worship, learning, prayer and sacrament shape us to live out our Christian lives. In baptism, we promise to proclaim the good news in word and deed, serving Christ in all people, and to work for justice and peace, honouring God in all creation. These are promises we renew together each year at Easter, and when anyone is baptised we affirm them by declaring that the promises made are also our task.

So, in one sense, baptism is a fixed point in time, the day when we make those promises, the water is poured over us and we are anointed with the holy oil. But, in another sense, baptism should be an ongoing reality in our lives.

Just as Abraham was called by God to be led by God on a journey, so we too are called to the Christian journey of our lives, with its ebbs and flows.

In the passage from his letter to the Romans, Paul is quite clear that the best thing Abraham ever did was to trust God, to have faith in God and follow where God led. The same is true for us. Faith is a free gift, unearned – not even by trusting God - but offered to us because God is God and God loves us. In what is undoubtedly the best known verse of today's Gospel reading, we are told: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.' The way we then live our lives as Christians is the evidence of our faith, of God's work in us – not brownie points to gain entry to heaven, but our response to God's self-giving love.

An analogy I came across is that faith is like an apple tree; if the tree is healthy and strong, then it produces apples. Lent is one of those times of the year when we are particularly encouraged to examine the quality of our apples and consider what that tells us about the underlying health of the tree. Or, to use a different analogy, a time to work on our spiritual fitness; in the same way as we might embark on a physical fitness campaign, to find ways to develop our spiritual habits and muscles by taking up Lenten disciplines. Disciplines that will help us learn to know God better, that will help us discern God's will for our lives, and that provide the resources that give us strength and resolve, particularly when the going is tough. They are referred to as 'disciplines' because, like improving our physical fitness, they require commitment and effort on our part.

Our faith is the first part of our baptismal promises. With improved spiritual habits and muscles, or with a healthier tree, depending on which analogy you prefer, we put ourselves in a better position to live out that faith, to show forth its fruit – which is the second part of our baptismal promises – the commitment to Christian life. We are called to show forth God's love in the world.

Which brings me, in a roundabout way, back to Fairtrade. We may well be fired up to proclaim the good news in word and deed, serving Christ in all people, and to work for justice and peace, honouring God in all creation, as our baptism promises say, but when confronted with the reality and the problems of the world, it can all seem somewhat overwhelming. But it's important that we are not overwhelmed, that we don't just wring our hands saying it's all too difficult and therefore do nothing. As I've said before, we are all called to do what we can, not what we can't. We're not called as individuals to solve all the problems of the world – God knows that is beyond us. But we can work with others to help alleviate some of those problems. Organisations like Fairtrade help us to do that. We know that our choices impact on others across the world, people we don't know personally. Doing something simple such as choosing a Fairtrade product enables us to work together to make a difference for them.

This is an example of a step on our journey of faith, and the fruit our faith in action. But, just as I am not arguing that an evening spent drinking delicious coffee and tasting chocolate in congenial company is an arduous Lenten discipline, so I am also not arguing that buying one or two Fairtrade products should salve our consciences over our impact on the world. However, it is one step that we then need to follow with others as we show forth the love of God in the world.