

## Readings for the Second Sunday after Pentecost

11<sup>th</sup> June 2023

### First Reading: Genesis 12:1-9

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. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the LORD appeared to Abram, and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.' So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the LORD and invoked the name of the LORD. And Abram journeyed on by stages towards the Negeb.

### Second Reading: Romans 4:13-25

The promise that Abraham 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. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations,' according to what was said, 'So numerous shall your descendants be.' He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith 'was reckoned to him as righteousness.'

Now the words, 'it was reckoned to him,' were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in God who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

### Gospel: St Matthew 9:9-13,18-26

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him.

And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax-collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' But when he heard this, he said, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'

While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, 'My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.' And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, 'If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.' Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, 'Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.' And instantly the woman was made well. When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute-players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, 'Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread throughout that district.

### **A Reflection for the second Sunday after Pentecost**

In this age of instant communication, and with information ... or misinformation ... on any topic available at our fingertips, it is easy to forget that this is a very recent phenomenon. When we want to travel, there is limitless information available on our proposed destination and, while we are away, we can keep in almost constant contact with loved ones back home, even sharing pictures and videos of our experiences with them before we are back.

Yet, just about all of us will be able to remember back to those seemingly strange times when, to contact friends or relatives in far-flung places meant a letter that sometimes took weeks to get through, or a crackly trunk call with a long delay that was expensive and reserved for special occasions. Or there was a telegram if something was really urgent.

As recently as 1991, I went trekking in Nepal with some friends. I was young and enthusiastic, my parents somewhat less enthusiastic though they largely kept that to themselves. I was away for a month during which there was no contact – no emails or phonecalls or WhatsApp messages. I did actually manage to phone them at one point. It was Mothering Sunday and I queued up at a telephone shop where I paid a fee and – after I had handed over my money – someone tried to put a call through to the number requested. I was lucky and got 2 or 3 minutes, which pleased and surprised my parents in equal measure, I think.

Go a few generations further back, to the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and there were no telephone services, and only a very rudimentary postal service. Communication with those who lived elsewhere, and especially beyond our shores, was almost non-existent.

For the explorers of earlier centuries, they really were setting out into the unknown. No maps or guidebooks of where they were heading; no way of letting those back home know how they were getting on, unless someone returned to tell them. In many ways, it really hadn't changed much since the time of Abraham. It is almost impossible for us to imagine just what it must have been like for him following God's command to set out for an unknown land.

Today we are entering the 'green' season of our church calendar. For approximately half the year, our calendar and our readings focus on the events of Jesus' life and our liturgical colours vary: purple, white, and occasionally red. For the other half of the year, we are in what is termed 'ordinary' time, a time of growth and that part of the year when we focus more on Jesus' teachings and their implications for our lives. So it seems appropriate that, on this first 'green' Sunday, our three readings teach us about faith – a good starting point (though not the same every year).

Our Old Testament reading is the beginning of the story of Abram and Sarai – not yet renamed Abraham and Sarah – from whom the three great Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam claim descent.

Abram and Sarai were called by God to set out on a dangerous journey, away from all that was familiar, and away from the protection afforded by one's own people, into an unknown territory. In return, they were promised that they would be blessed and be made into a great nation – a somewhat surprising promise given their age and that they had no children, and one that returns frequently in their ongoing story.

For Paul, in his letter to the Romans, Abram, or Abraham, is the example of faith *par excellence*, and faith is the key to righteousness before God. Earlier in the letter (3:23), Paul says that 'all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God'. We are incapable of becoming righteous by our own efforts or by attempting to keep the rules, the Law; we need to have faith in God. Indeed, by giving the example of Abraham's faith, well before the Law was given to Moses, Paul reminds his audience that faith has always been the key to righteousness before God.

In today's Gospel reading, we meet three very different people who demonstrate faith in Jesus. First is Matthew the tax collector who followed Jesus, and therefore presumably gave up his previous lifestyle. Tax collectors were despised agents of the Roman occupiers who frequently extorted money over and above what was due, impoverishing the people. Then there is the leader of the synagogue, a man with an esteemed and powerful position but in desperate need, whose daughter has died but whose faith that Jesus can restore her to life is vindicated. And finally, the woman with haemorrhages, someone who would have been excluded and ostracised by society. She touched Jesus' cloak in faith and received more than the physical healing of her ailment, being acknowledged by Jesus, thus restoring her to society. In each case, in response to their faith, Jesus is able to reach out to them and address their individual need for healing.

So what exactly is faith? Last week, Fr John spoke about the mystery of the Trinity that is at the heart of our Christian faith, a mystery that does not have a neatly worked out explanation but is founded on two thousand years of lived experience. Just as it is inadvisable to attempt to define the mystery of the Trinity within the limits of our human understanding, so too faith is a mystery that we should be wary of trying to define too closely. However, at its heart, I would say that faith has a lot to do with trust. Abraham trusted God. As Paul says in today's passage from Romans, that despite all appearances to the contrary, Abraham believed God's promise that he would become the father of many nations.

We too are called to trust God, to believe that God will fulfil God's promises, however unlikely that may seem at times. We can trust God because God is faithful to his promises to us. At end of today's passage from Romans, we are reminded of God's great love for humanity shown in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul concludes that Jesus was raised for our justification. To be justified in this sense is to be made righteous before God.

Of course, that is not always, or even often, easy. We can feel that because we may have doubts, that our faith is less than it ought to be. But it is important to recognise that faith and doubt are not opposites. It was the theologian Paul Tillich who said that the opposite of faith is not doubt, it is certainty. To an extent, I think it is maybe human to desire a degree of certainty in our lives, but I also feel that there are so many things that it is really better not to know. Faith encompasses doubt and not knowing, and keeps us believing in spite of those things.

Our faith is also challenged by the disappointments and setbacks of life. Faith is to continue to hold on to that trust God even when we do not understand what God is doing.

And there is a communal aspect to this faith that helps us. When we say the creed together, we start 'We believe ...' We have faith together and we have faith for each other that carries us all when some of us are struggling.

As people of faith, we are more like the ancient explorers than travellers of today, with everything we think we need to know immediately available. We share in the long tradition of the faith shown by Abraham and Sarah by moving forward into the unknown of the future, despite our doubts, our disappointments and our unfulfilled dreams, trusting that ultimately God will make all things well because God is faithful.