

Readings for the Second Sunday in Lent

25th February 2024

First Reading: Genesis 17:1-7,15-16

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.' Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, 'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.'

God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.'

Second Reading: Romans 4:13-25

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. 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 him 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 Mark 8:31-38

Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' He called the crowd with

his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

A Reflection for the Second Sunday in Lent

What comes to mind when you think of the word 'discipline'? Personally, my initial reaction is negative; I associate being disciplined with being reprimanded or punished for some misdemeanour – perhaps it's an indication of a guilty conscience! Discipline in organisations, such as schools, is about rules governing behaviour, with associated penalties for infringement much more common than rewards for compliance. These understandings of discipline are, in essence, about control, usually control by the powerful over the less powerful.

But 'being disciplined' can also have positive associations. Being disciplined in one's approach to a task, for example practising one's scales on the piano or attending sports training conscientiously, is about taking something seriously, being responsible and diligent, about persisting even when something is challenging, all positive attitudes. And different branches of learning can be referred to as disciplines, perhaps a reflection of the commitment needed to master them.

In the church, in this season of Lent, we sometimes refer to Lenten disciplines. On Ash Wednesday, our liturgy invites us to 'observe a holy Lent' by self-examination and repentance, prayer, fasting and self-denial, and by reading and meditating on God's holy word. These lead us to the three traditional Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving or works of mercy. We often over-emphasise the 'fasting', the 'giving things up', and forget that the other two are equally important. Some Orthodox Christians observe a strict fast in Lent, abstaining from meat, fish, eggs, dairy products, olive oil, wine and other alcoholic drinks. This is not about simply following rules but about emptying ourselves of the cares and concerns of the world, to prepare ourselves to serve and grow closer to God. It is fasting in order to focus on those other two Lenten disciplines of prayer and almsgiving. By their standards, our Episcopalian or Anglican practice of leaving the choice up to individuals, often meaning we give up something we probably have too much of anyway, seems rather lenient – and not so disciplined!

The word 'discipline' is probably related to 'disciple', coming from the Latin word meaning pupil, student or follower, and related to the word meaning 'to learn', although, when I looked this up, I was surprised to discover that not all scholars agree on this.

In New Testament times, many eminent figures in the Greek and Roman world, as well as in Jewish tradition, gathered disciples in order to teach and lead them. In the Bible, the word 'disciple' is most commonly used for the followers of Jesus, although there are also references to other groups of disciples such as those of John the Baptist. Jesus' disciples were more than the twelve designated as apostles, and were a larger group of followers, including women. Today, we would use the word 'disciple' to include ourselves as part of that ever-increasing group of those, living and departed, who follow Christ.

In today's Gospel, Jesus teaches his disciples about his mission as Messiah and the nature of the discipleship to which they were called. Jesus' call to discipleship is a call that has three imperatives. He says: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves ... and take up their cross ... and follow me.' It is an invitation to follow him that comes just after he has openly declared that he is on a journey that will lead to suffering and death. It doesn't sound like a call for the faint-hearted, but perhaps that is especially who it is for. Don't forget that the chosen twelve, at the centre of that group of disciples, went on to betray, deny and desert Jesus.

It can be tempting to think that we understand self-denial and cross-bearing when we face difficult situations in our lives, but Jesus' demand on those who would follow him is more radical than that. To deny ourselves is to put Jesus' priorities and purposes ahead of our own desires, to set our mind on divine things, not just occasionally, or some of the time, but all of the time. To take up our cross is to be willing to suffer the consequences of such faithful living. To follow him is to be prepared to travel to unknown destinations on a journey that may well be dangerous but also promises to be life-giving. Remember that Jesus said this on his way to Jerusalem and Calvary, a journey that was both dangerous and ultimately life-giving.

This is an all-encompassing call that is both frightening and demanding and, if we are honest, many of us would much rather hold back a bit. In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

The cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man [or woman], he bids him [or her] come and die.

Mercifully, few of us are called to Bonhoeffer's fate, but we have seen an example this week. I have no idea whether or not Alexei Navalny was a Christian, but he displayed Christ-like values in standing up for what he believed was right and true in the face of oppression and injustice, and it has cost him his life.

For the majority of us, to take up our cross is not a call to martyrdom but to other acts of self-giving, to acts of love and generosity that set aside our own priorities, and may mean we risk rejection, shame and loss. To take up our cross may be costly in many ways. But, although Jesus' call is a challenge, it is also a blessing. It calls us to a reorientation of our lives in ways which also draw us into a closer relationship with Christ, a relationship that promises love, peace and new life. A relationship in which he promises to be with us always and to give us the strength to face the challenges.

The discipline of Lent should be seen positively, not as a punishment for excesses at other times of the year, nor should it be a guilt trip. It is an opportunity for renewal, a time to move forward as we deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Christ. A time to focus on all that is faithful good and true, acknowledging our total dependence on an all-loving, generous and forgiving God. Lent is a season that helps us to grow into the likeness of Christ, and practising the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving trains us in faithful obedience for the rest of the year.