

Readings for the Second Sunday in Lent

1st March 2026

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

I haven't travelled anywhere outside the UK for quite some years now, although, in the past, I have been fortunate to visit a number of other countries. Of course, usually when we travel, we research where we are going, look up the most interesting places to visit, good places to eat, comfortable places to stay. We can look at pictures of the scenery, check what the weather is likely to be. We keep in touch while we are away, and send home pictures at the press of a button on our phones. Such travel is commonplace and it can be hard for us to understand just how different this is from long distance travel in past generations.

It never ceases to astonish me how far some people did travel in ancient times, but the majority tended to stay close to home, the place where they were born. Even a century or two ago, most of those who went to distant lands tended to stay there; it was a one-way ticket. They probably wouldn't see home again and communication with family left behind was difficult, with letters taking a long time to get through. And they only had limited information about the place they were going to: no pictures, no guide books. It would have been like that for most of those leaving from this area to make a new life in Canada.

We can scarcely imagine what it was like thousands of years ago for Abram who, as we read in today's short passage from Genesis, was told by God to uproot his family, leave his country and his kin, and go to a land that God will show him. His family had already been on the move. Previously his father, Terah, had brought the family from Ur, a town that was near Basra in the south of modern-day Iraq, to Haran, which is in the south-east of modern-day Turkey. Now, God tells Abram to move on, and he goes.

The journey was not that long by modern standards - it is about 600 miles from Ur to Haran, and about 400 miles more on to Canaan - but it was a journey into the unknown, with unknown dangers. For us, who know so much about how the world works, who have medicines to cure or alleviate many diseases we might encounter, who are warned at every turn about the dangers we might face, the willingness of Abram to step into the complete unknown seems strange, even archaic. If someone were to embark on such a journey now without doing their research into what they might find, and especially the potential hazards, we would probably call them foolhardy. Yet Abram went in faith because God had spoken and made him promises. God promised to make him a great nation - he would have many descendants, and God promised to bless him, blessing that implies both material provision and God's presence with him.

There were no guarantees with God's promises, but Abram had faith that they would be fulfilled. As Paul makes clear in today's passage from Romans, Abram did nothing to earn or deserve those promises; he received them because he had faith in God. And Paul goes on to make clear that the same faith is expected of us all, a new way of thinking that puts absolute trust in God.

Lent is a season when we are particularly encouraged to take up practices that will help to deepen our faith. But it is not a simple equation: 'do this' and 'this much more faith will result'. As Paul also makes clear, faith is not a rules-based system; God's promises rest on grace; faith is a gift as we make the effort to deepen our relationship with God.

Nicodemus, in today's Gospel, would have very much liked a rules-based faith. We have a tendency to view the Pharisees negatively and, by and large, they don't get a good write-up in the Gospels. However, they were a group who took their faith seriously and wanted others to do so too. They were devout, with a deep knowledge of the Scriptures, and their religious practice, their interpretation of the Law, was designed to show people how to live the best life of devotion to God. They are portrayed as being counter to Jesus partly because the group gathering around him was not behaving rightly according to their interpretation.

For Jesus, the Pharisees rules had become too much, an end in themselves rather than a way of living according to God's wishes – too many minutiae that obscured truth. As Jesus is reported as saying in Matthew's Gospel (23:23): 'Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith'.

So Nicodemus, as a Pharisee, took a risk in coming to Jesus, at the very least risking the condemnation of his peers. And he came at night – in the dark both literally, and reflecting his lack of understanding. And yet, in Jesus, he recognised something of God and wanted to know more. He would like to get everything explained clearly, nailed down, to fit in with his rules-based system, ... but for him, and perhaps for us too, Jesus seems to be speaking in riddles. 'No-one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' 'No-one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.'

Jesus saw into Nicodemus' heart and wanted to move him on from an earthly, rules-based approach to his faith to a spiritual awareness. Just as we can feel the wind, and know it is there even though we can't see it, so Jesus wants Nicodemus, and us, to be aware of God's Spirit moving in our lives, and in the world, to lead and guide us. Allowing that Spirit to let us see a bigger picture than simply what is in front of us. To learn to recognise God's love for all the world, God's longing for the liberation and healing of all creation.

So our Gospel passage comes to one of the most famous verses in the whole Bible: '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.' God's love for all he created is so incredible, so beyond our human comprehension. The word translated as 'world' here is more than people, more than living things, it encompasses everything. And Jesus continues: 'God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.' Jesus came to draw the world to God, to help increase faith and trust in God and God's good purposes, and not to condemn for inadequacy of faith or lack of adherence to 'the rules'. That really is Good News.

So perhaps the message of these readings to us is to be courageous this Lent, like Nicodemus, and to be prepared, like Abram, to trust God and to step out into the unknown, knowing that God is with us. To feel and be open to the moving of God's Spirit and to follow where it leads. To recognise and share God's love for all creation and to know ourselves as loved by God unconditionally. This is faith and, however strong or feeble you may feel your faith to be, God rejoices in it and promises to bless you.