

Second Sunday in Lent - 2017

Isn't it strange how we hanker for the past! When you consider the extraordinary advances in medicine and communications and transport to name but three, why do we think in this way? When you are young you look forward with such optimism. I want to be grown up, I want to drive, I want to go to the pub; at some point a switch is flicked and we start to look back! If you reflect on the issues of our day, religious fundamentalism, political populism, even environmentalism, paleo diets, anti vax... there is the desire to return to some utopian past. We do it in the church, we look to those halcyon days when all was well, the church was full, and the minister... he was a wonderful man!

Stevie Smith, an English poet whose real name was Florence, wrote:

People who are always praising the past
And especially the times of faith as best
Ought to go and live in the Middle Ages
And be burnt at the stake as witches and sages.

If we are people of faith our hope must always lie in what is to come. Is it stretching things to say that Abraham is the most influential person who ever lived? Some say he is the most influential person who *never* lived, such is the mystery surrounding him. One Rabbi wrote, "For me Abraham is philosophy, Abraham is culture. Abraham may or may not be historical. Abraham is a message of loving kindness. Abraham is an idea. Abraham is everything. I don't need flesh and blood." If we look at Matthew's genealogy of Jesus who does it begin with... Abraham? For Matthew, no Abraham no Jesus!

One author suggests that the encounter between God and Abraham might be the most important moment in the history of civilization because, he writes, in that moment the idea of a future was born. The phrase in Hebrew, wayyelekh Avram – "Abram went" – are two of the boldest words in all of literature, for in that moment Abram defined the nature of faith as 'leaving where you are and going somewhere you've never been before.' In that moment began the history of striving, of moving towards a goal, of pilgrimage, the Jews brought a new understanding of time. There was a move from the understanding of time as cyclical - the never ending wheel of time, in which we are ensnared. To the idea of time as lineal - having a beginning and an ending, a destination, a destiny. The ancient sages might suggest to their followers - do not journey, but sit and meditate on the river of life and its endless and meaningless flow. We can find this thinking in Ecclesiastes:

What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.

Is there a thing of which it is said,
'See, this is new'?
It has already been,
in the ages before us.

The phrase 'Abram went' is a counter to the thinking that says 'I've seen it all before!' Abram's stepping out in faith is a refusal to say *Que sera sera*; it is demonstrating faith in the God who precedes us something we live out every week in our motto 'Come and see' and something we hear in the words of Isaiah... 'I am about to do a new thing.' This journey of Abram, would be

mirrored in the corporate journey of the people of Israel journeying in the wilderness. It is the meta narrative of our faith, this sense of journey, pilgrimage, this striving for something new, as St Paul would write ‘straining forward for what lies ahead.’

This Sunday and over the next three Sundays we hear the gospel texts used by the ancient Church in the education of catechumens in Lent prior to their baptism. At the Easter vigil they would be brought into the baptistery adjacent to the church, stripped and immersed, clothed in white, anointed and then brought into the body of the Church to take their place with the faithful. In making their communion for the very first time having been initiated into the sacred mysteries, they were going somewhere they’d never been before; they were new.

Today we begin that journey with Nicodemus. It is a journey that will be played out in three episodes throughout John’s gospel. It is another story of faith as ‘leaving where you are and going somewhere you’ve never been before.’ But rather than a physical journey like Abram’s it is journey of the heart, a journey to the interior. Nicodemus comes to Jesus ‘by night’ a small phrase redolent with meaning for John. Nicodemus over these three episodes is drawn into the light, he is drawn into a new life ‘in the Spirit.’ It is no Damascus road experience, Nicodemus is frightened, confused. He has seen the signs that Jesus did but he cannot see clearly what they might mean, he is “a man of the Pharisees, a ruler of the Jews”, he cannot be seen to be consorting with Jesus by day, he comes at night.

Being a disciple, born of the Spirit, involves a radical rupture with the previous life in the flesh, but this is not something which Jesus has invented. The distinction between the flesh and the Spirit, the religious world of the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the true religion of Yahweh as proclaimed by the prophets has always been available. You can almost hear Jesus chiding Nicodemus ...you know the Psalms: ‘The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.’ You know the prophets: ‘And rend your heart and not your garments.’ You are a teacher of Israel, and this you do not know?

We next encounter Nicodemus in John chapter 7, where he is making his first tentative steps out into the daylight. The Pharisees are furious with the temple guard for failing to arrest Jesus. They turn on those who dare to believe in Jesus and with great courage Nicodemus breaks ranks, not yet by openly supporting Jesus, but by a legal challenge to his fellow lawyers ‘Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?’

The final time we see Nicodemus night is falling – but he has stepped into the full light of day, as he turns up to help Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus at a time which would have made him ritually unclean. In this tribute to Jesus he has finally broken out of the world of “flesh” and emerged into the world of Spirit. He has journeyed to the interior, to the heart.

This is the journey of Lent, our journey. It is not easy, nothing really worth doing ever is. We are gradually being reborn if we are able to look to matters of the heart, things that really matter. The journey of Lent is a journey of deepening faith and faith is ‘leaving where you are and going somewhere you’ve never been before,’ our hope is not in the past, but in what is to come... it is the future, but be mindful....the future is not what it was!

Wise Nicodemus saw such light
As made him know his God by night. Amen.