

Second Sunday in Lent – 2018

'In the presence of the God in whom Abraham believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.' I wonder if this statement encapsulates what faith is all about: Belief that we are living in the presence of the God who gives life to the dead and who calls into existence the things that do not exist.

It seems to me that Christian life is all about how we live in that in-between space. A spot between the incredible promise that God will redeem the world, about which more often than not there seems little ground for hope, and its ultimate realization. Can we say that our lives are all about the pilgrimage through that space, and that we pay special attention to that space in Lent? We dramatise it, give it a context - the notion of the wilderness, that dry and arid place which at times seems devoid of hope.

We can see that Peter is in such a place in today's passage from Mark's gospel, suddenly his future evaporates, he has followed Jesus and in him he has found someone whom he can trust to fulfill his dreams. Jesus' talk of suffering and death is more than Peter can cope with. His reaction, his rebuke of Jesus is not one of concern for his master but perhaps for himself. In this wilderness between promise and fulfillment we too can so easily find that fear and selfishness becomes our besetting sins

On Friday the Church celebrated the life and witness of St Polycarp the 2nd century Bishop of Smyrna in modern day Turkey. The story of the martyrdom of this 86 year old man is a harrowing one. The account of the debate between Polycarp and the Roman Proconsul who tried to persuade him to renounce his faith is reminiscent of Jesus before Pilate and there are many similarities between the Passion of Jesus and the martyrdom the Polycarp. But can we find inspiration *today* from such stories. How did the Martyrs of the early church deal with this wilderness? How do we as Christians deal with this wilderness living.

There is always a temptation to look back to some utopia that existed...back then! Or to look to the future with a fixed smile an optimistic air; neither are satisfactory and neither are consistent with our faith in the incarnation, cross and resurrection of Jesus. The martyrs of the early church lived their lives amidst the reality of persecution, there was no memory of how wonderful things used to be, and certainly no easy optimism that things would be okay. Their suffering they linked completely with that of Christ.

This too is our calling; to lay aside the fear and selfishness to which we inevitably drawn in our wilderness and to resist the temptation to find

comfort in the past or solace in an imagined future. But this calling, if we really engage with it, is very difficult. Just listen again to Jesus today: '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... I won't go on it doesn't get any easier! So how can we live in this shadow?

Amongst the famous words in scripture are those of St Paul writing to the Corinthians: 'And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.' The word Paul used for love was 'Agape.' Reinhold Niebuhr the American theologian and ethicist once wrote 'Agape love in history ends in suffering and a cross.' Such love he called an 'impossible possibility'; a love that we can barely conceive of, it is the love of God revealed in Christ for us. It has nothing to do with the sentimentality that often passes for love and which has nothing to offer those living in the wilderness in the place between promise and fulfillment. We are tempted to doubt that such love can be possible. Can we really have faith that such love can be ours? Our journey then fundamentally one of hope.

It is my experience that hope is perhaps the most attractive trait that the Christian person can demonstrate. It's about *quiet* confidence and continuity, we need to hold together the past, the present and the future as one and live now. And when we live in this way, the way of hopefulness, quietly confident in the promises of God, that God's promises of the past are real - lived out us through us and we are able to look forward. Such a way of life has its outworking when we demonstrate that none of us are in the wilderness *alone*. Remember that Jesus doesn't desert us with our crosses, he says quite simply follow me and it is in following that we find hope. Hope is tied up with memory and memory is all about remembering who we are 'The Body of Christ.' There is no sentimentality in this, no sentimentality in following Jesus, no fixed smiles, and certainly no wishy washy optimism. One writer put it: "we point toward the life of the world to come by holding ourselves open to the future without projecting any of our wishes on to it." In true hope any fear or selfishness, the temptations of our wilderness journey, vanish. We open ourselves to God, to each other and to the world around us.

We are called to follow Jesus *together*, he addresses *the crowd* in today's reading, we carry our crosses *together* and from time to time we carry each other's. This is how we live between the promise and its fulfillment. At today's AGM we will consider the life of our parish. We will look back, yes, but with gratitude and we will look forward with hope as *together* we continue our pilgrimage following Jesus on this great journey trusting in God's promises and looking for their fulfillment. Amen.