

Giving Up and Taking Up in Lent

Sermon for the 2nd Sunday of Lent, Year B, 28 February 2021

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22: 24-32; Romans 4: 13-25; Mark 8: 31-38

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.

Some tried and true advice for Lent is to take something up, as well as giving something up. We might take up a Lenten study, a suitable book, a charitable commitment, or just be more serious about prayer and bible reading. As for giving something up, Father Martin wisely reminded us last Sunday that there's more to it than just doing without booze or chocolate. He suggested that we might give up something we've come to overly rely on, that's become unhelpful to us. And what might that be? ... The aim of this taking up and giving up is to become more aligned with Christ's work in our lives as we prepare for the great giving up of Good Friday, and the great taking up of Easter Sunday.

Today's readings each offer versions of giving up and taking up.

The Genesis reading at one level is a fertility story, but at a deeper level it's a story about trusting God's promises.

Abram and Sarai had long been childless. Abram had already done the Handmaid's Tale ceremony with his wife's slave girl, Hagar, who bore a son called Ishmael. The ancient near East also knew various pagan practices for dealing with childlessness, and we see a number of these referenced elsewhere in the Old Testament, from temple prostitution and sacred poles to the use of mandrakes and other charms.

Stories like the one in Genesis today are a rebuke to this pagan world, outdoing its claim to spiritual power. The God of Israel will secure the legacy promised to Abram; God's blessings to the chosen people will prove reliable. So, there's no need for conceiving children on the wrong side of the blanket, as Abram did with Hagar, and there's no need for the assisted reproductive technology of ancient paganism. That whole way of thinking, that whole anxious scramble to

overcome the curse of infertility, has to be given up, while God's promise is taken up in faith. Which of course means that ancient Abraham and elderly Sarah, freshly renamed, will have to set about trying to conceive a child.

I should make clear that this story *doesn't* represent a promise to every childless couple in our day that if they demonstrate the faith of Abraham, God will bless them in the same way. Scott Morrison might well have thought along those lines when he and Jenny managed to conceive naturally, against the medical odds, giving thanks to God. But for others like Lisa and me the traditional prayer for children offered at our wedding wasn't answered, nor were many of our own prayers later on. No, God's promise to Israel of a physical legacy is a pointer to God's more universal and more eternal promises, which we find in the New Testament, and not least in our Epistle and Gospel this morning.

St Paul in Romans today is explaining how God's promise to Israel is going global, going viral, so that all the non-Jews who were flocking into the earliest Churches could see themselves

as sharing in the same promise. So, Paul develops the story of Abraham, the father of Israel, declaring that his faith in Israel's God now makes him the father of a universal family in the Church. Paul makes his point by relativizing Israel's law in the light of this universal promise. Paul brings the then-breakthrough insight that the Old Testament law, which the Jews honoured and kept, isn't necessary for non-Jews to observe. Paul tells us instead that Abraham's faith is what we should be observing. The law has its place, as a thankful outgrowth of faith, as a guide to thankful obedience in God's service, at least for Jewish Christians in those early days. But it can't be a proud badge of God's exclusive favour.

This is Paul's great theological undertaking, to make clear how God's blessings mustn't be turned into markers of insider status, so that outsiders who don't follow the rules of insidership can be damned and excluded. We all recognise this as the way our world goes round. Self-described law abiding, respectable people build themselves up at the expense of those they disapprove of, not least these days because of race and gender. This is why Paul says today that

the law is about wrath, because it condemns and excludes, while apart from the law there's no such condemnation.

There's no way to understand and share in God's promises, to take our baptised place in God's kingdom of compassion, solidarity and inclusion, if we cling to a self-justifying badge of priority status. From the born-to-rule smugness of the far right to the grievance-fuelled excesses of cancel culture on the angry left, we see this playing out everywhere in our political culture today. All this has to be given up, and something more wonderful taken up.

And this is the promise to Abraham in its developed, New Testament form. Forget the law as a mark of insidership and divine favouritism. Good Friday tells a different story. Jesus dies on the cross as an outlaw, as a figure of scandal, of taboo, alongside criminals and other scum, cast outside the Holy City. This is about as unlikely a starting place for God's promises being fulfilled as Abraham and Sarah in advanced age setting about conceiving a child. But then Paul proclaims the resurrection, God's great game changer, which, like God's creation itself, brings life from the dead, and calls into

existence things that don't exist. The lawless outsider, hated and crucified, is vindicated and exalted on Easter Sunday; the wrath of the law yields to a new creation with no condemnation, with no exclusion, with no contempt from the smugly self-righteous, as we discover in Jesus crucified and risen an unexpected, unprecedented, accessible, welcoming, and liberating version of what righteousness really means.

So, where the Old Testament promise for Israel's future was secured by kinship and legacy, the good news of Easter for all humanity is that God secures our future in the risen Jesus Christ, beyond wrath, beyond death, beyond forgetting. And so, having children isn't everything, and it's certainly not our only hedge against an empty future. We can give that up. And the law isn't something we should cling to, either, or some contemporary equivalent of it, as if that'll secure us against feeling diminished and missing out. So, we give up relying on what Paul elsewhere calls the works of the law, and we take up faith in the resurrection—in the alternative future that God offers.

And finally, a word about today's Gospel. Jesus tells his disciples that they have to give up their thoughts of worldly success, of religious glory, and prepare instead for him to be cast out, shamed and defeated. Because only once the whole agenda of worldly insidership has been shown up for the sham it is will Jesus be raised by God.

Peter can't bear this, and he insists on Jesus fulfilling the normal expectations of worldly success. But Jesus tells Peter to pull his head in. The teaching that follows about taking up our cross and following Jesus is often understood in a much blander way than Jesus intends. We've all heard that taking up our cross means bearing life's burdens patiently and so forth. But we need to remember that crucifixion was a carefully designed theatre of absolute defeat, brutally extinguishing dignity, agency and resistance.

Taking up the cross, then, is about giving up on the appearances of worldly success, giving up on satisfying closure, and on Hollywood endings, so that going forward with Jesus in the faith of Abraham we can discover God's

future beyond everything we could have engineered or even imagined for ourselves.

This is what that sharp warning at the end of today's Gospel means: as we give up seeking to save our life by standard worldly means, we'll find ourselves lifted up alive in the resurrection despite everything. Hence Jesus tells us today that we shouldn't fear the shame of the cross, lest we incur a worse shame when he comes in glory with the Holy Angels and finds us busily in pursuit of something else.

So, friends, we give up self-reliance as Abraham and Sarah did, preferring to take up trust in God's promise. We give up relying on the law in a self-justifying way because it'll never free us from a punishing and punished mentality. Instead, by following Jesus in faith beyond all self-justification we take up our baptised place in the resurrection and the new creation. Lastly, as Jesus tells us today, we need to give up obsessions about worldly success or avoiding loss of face and be ready to take up our own cross. That way we'll find new life and a secure future with God that we'll never get to apart from

faith. This is the heart of giving up and taking up in Lent, all of which is visualized, ritualized, dramatized and celebrated in our Eucharist.

The Lord be with you ...