

Second Sunday in Lent 2020

Yesterday morning as is my practise I ran around the base of mount Ainslie in the local 'Parkrun.' Later I checked my results, I was first in my age group! I was the only one in my age group, 'the first shall be last and the last first!' I guess I am becoming increasingly aware of the passing of time and as I age I find the words of Ecclesiastes on my lips! There is nothing new under the sun.

It sounds rather a pessimistic view; we tend to like new things, they are shiny and fast, nutritious and environmentally friendly. But there is a truth in that new things rarely come out of nowhere. In the Book of Revelation the one seated on the throne says 'behold I am making all things new.' In this proclamation there is a sense that newness is being made out of what is already there. *Nova ex veteris* runs the old Latin proverb – 'the new must be born of the old.' The new is latent in the old; in the old there is the promise of newness.

My family has a favourite hymn that is sung at family funerals. It is a hymn about Mary, it begins 'Ye who own the faith of Jesus.' In one of the verses we sing:

Blessèd were the chosen people
out of whom the Lord did come;
blessèd was the land of promise
fashioned for his earthly home;

The land of promise, what does this mean and where is this place? The Parish Council and I are currently reviewing the covenant that binds us together. It is an agreement made between us that speaks of hope and expectations. It is sealed between us as equal parties. It is a little like the marriage covenant sealed between couples as they enter into a partnership, a covenant of equals, spoken into being: I will!

We cannot grapple with today's readings – which are demanding, without understanding the importance of the Biblical idea of Covenant. There are many different covenants entered into in the Old Testament, most of them are between God and the people of Israel through the Patriarchs and Kings: Noah and Abraham, Moses and David, the list goes on. Covenant is the basic paradigm of Judaism, one God and one people of God, in a covenantal relationship. For the Jewish people, to this very day, the obligation required under the covenant was to obey the commandments given by God and enshrined in the Torah.

The covenant struck by Moses is perhaps the most famous of them all. We all know the story of the tablets on which the commandments were engraved, what we call the Mosaic Law. But the Old Testament speaks of covenants before that, there is the covenant with Noah when God promised never again to send a flood on the earth. And importantly for us today the covenant with Abraham described in Genesis in two distinct traditions in chapters 15 and 17.

The old covenants with Noah and with Abraham can be best described as promissory. It is this which Paul wants us to dwell on as we consider Abram as the father of faith. The covenant with Abram, who becomes Abraham as the covenant is sealed, is the promise that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars of the night sky – there was little earthly hope of that! He was seventy-five! But Paul reminds us that Abraham believed that this would happen, this is the basis of the covenant between God and Abraham – the promise that in God all things will be made new, will be promising - and 'Abraham believed God.' Abraham by responding to this promise becomes our father in faith.

The story begins today with the words 'Abram went' what one writer described as 'the boldest words in all literature.' This is the beginning of something new, something better, something yet to happen; but it is happening, as new things must happen, in the midst of the old, usual, reality of daily life. Abram's friends would have laughed at him. Their religion was one in which fate ruled - there is nothing new under the sun.

2020 has not begun well. I don't need to rehearse the events that have so far have dominated our newsfeeds, or whatever it is that you use to inform you; things do not seem very promising. But when we are tempted to think in this way, the words of Jesus to Nicodemus should pull us up short: Nicodemus it seemed was unable to see that anything new could happen and that that newness could come out of the old. So I have to be literally born again he says? Jesus responds 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?' Have you forgotten Abraham, your father in faith who at seventy-five believed that something new was possible and believed in its promise?

If we look forward to the Friday of the crucifixion Pilate gives permission for Joseph of Arimathea to remove the body of Jesus from the cross and take it away for burial. He is helped by a man, Nicodemus who brings spices and ointments for anointing the body. Pharisees didn't touch dead bodies especially not on the eve of the Sabbath, the holy day. Did Nicodemus look upon the cross remember the words of Jesus, just as Moses lifted up the serpent, the son of man will be lifted up; is Nicodemus following Abraham and stepping out in faith, when all appears to be finished?

We live by unspoken covenants with each other. We are, each of us, bound by a covenant of reciprocity – do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Our democratic way of life is a covenant and at the heart of covenant is promise. Our commercial life is same, there is reciprocity in employment covenants. This way of living is being eroded in many ways, in many areas of our lives we do not believe in promises.

So our task in this Lenten season and indeed in every season is to cultivate the land of promise; this land is not a geographical place, indeed I am looking at it, it is the human family in which Jesus has promised to be present. When we celebrate a God who is faithful to his promise our hearts are renewed in hope and understanding together. In our meetings, in our discussions, and, yes, even in our conflicts, we cultivate promise. Sometimes we are tempted to see that there

is little promise in the future, it is true that sometimes it does not look promising. But let us keep our focus on God's promises which so often seem to come out of old and unpromising situations and which are made new as we gather and make Eucharist together. Let us recall the promise offered to Abraham and given voice in that great truth that God so loved our world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Amen.