

The second Sunday in Lent 2022

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18, Philippians 3:17-4:1, Luke 13:13-35

A book called 'Happiness' was recently lent to me and I have been reading it slowly. It is not a self-help book, I'm not going to Yoga classes – not yet! It is all about the complexity of living in a modern cosmopolitan city. There is a clash of cultures, there are those who have sought asylum, there is old age dementia, teenage mental illness, relationship breakdown. One of the characters is studying the urban foxes that live in and around London. They are not popular among many: 'they attack children you know,' 'they poo on my lawn,' 'they gave my Labrador mange.' The fox becomes a metaphor for all those living with discrimination and mistrust. The book is about finding happiness in the urban jungle where trust is at a premium.

It seems that the love hate relationship between humans and foxes is centuries old. In Aesop's fables the fox is sneaky, false and callous; I suspect Aesop kept chickens and those of you who have kept chickens will perhaps resonate with today's reading from Luke. Herod the fox is after Jesus the chicken!

Those of you who have been to the Middle East or Asia and others countries where there are markets proliferate would know that there is an expectation that you will haggle with the stall holders. I'm not very comfortable with this, I'd rather pay the asking price and move on. But of course in many of these markets there are no price tags you have to, as we say, 'cut a deal.' This idea of brokering or cutting a deal finds its roots way back in the distance past and in today's Old Testament reading we find Abram in this ancient ceremony cutting a deal with God, or more accurately God cutting a deal with Abram.

But there is something at work here which is clearly missing our dealings with your average Arthur Daly type. I always feel when I am trying to cut a deal or haggle that there is something dishonest about it all; it is not an environment in which I feel there is a sense of trust. I feel as if I am having the wool pulled over my eyes. Of course there is a world of difference between our market place haggling and the relationship between God and Abram. It is the difference between contract and covenant. A contract belongs in the world of business and markets, a covenant is based on love and friendship, on trust. In this encounter what Abram wanted was an heir, and clearly he trusts that God will deliver the promise that he will have many descendants, he does and they are here, they are you and me.

For Paul writing to the Galatians, Abraham is the archetype of all who believe, all who trust, he is our father in faith – a title which challenges us in our relationships with Jews and Moslems, both of whom make the

same claim. Paul echoes the words we heard this morning from Genesis: God sees Abram's trust and 'the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.' It seems this willingness on the part of God to accept our trust, as the equivalent of actual goodness, is an abiding characteristic of the God we worship. It is not goodness that God seeks from us but trust. I for one find this an enormous relief, but of course it represents to us a whole new set of challenges. Being good is something I can have a go at – sometimes I manage it. But placing my trust in someone? Is that something I can really contemplate. In the letter of James, he in turn quotes Paul: 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness', and then goes on 'and he was called the friend of God.' Words we sang in our introit hymn, What an extraordinary and lovely thing...a friend of God. Perhaps I can, I believe I can.

Perhaps that is what Paul means, Join in imitating me...and the writers of Lectionary very wisely conclude with the first verse of the next chapter...Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. In other words - my friends imitate me, we can trust in the Christ of God.

The readings set up a contrast between those we can trust and those who are untrustworthy. The fox is crafty or sly, the Hen desires nothing more than to gather her brood under her protective wings. This is one of those occasions when Jesus is depicted in the feminine, the hen is defenceless against the fox but is still prepared to gather and protect her brood under her wings, with her own body. Jesus is living out a Psalm that he would have known: Guard me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings. In the gospel today we hear Jesus, despite being warned that that fox Herod was out to kill him, set his goal firmly on Jerusalem, the place where the prophets are killed. He would not be diverted from this journey, such was his trust in God. This might seem impossible to us, it might seem as if we are being set up to fail. But it is not our faith or trust in God that matters first and foremost but the faith and trust of his Christ whom we follow. The faith and trust of his Body the Church, in whom we live and move.

Ultimately Christ calls us his body to trust with him; to trust in God in the face of a world which seems eminently untrustworthy. There is little trust in our world today, we can see that around us – it's a jungle out there! And I don't need to rehearse it. We, the Church, have proved to be untrustworthy at differing times in history, Lent is a time to reflect on that, as we are. Our role in this world is to trust and be trustworthy so with Paul we might say 'imitate us,' and we might bring all people into the shadow of the wings of our Lord, particularly those who live with discrimination and mistrust. Happiness, or rather joy, can be ours if we trust. Amen.