

Are we Prepared to travel?

St Philip's Anglican Church. O'Connor

Second Sunday in Lent, Year A — 5 March 2023

Reverend Martin Johnson

Genesis 12.1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4.1-5, 13-17; John 3.1-17

'I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great...'

This has recently happened in our family! Susan and I have recently been bestowed with the title 'Great!' I am a Great Uncle and Susan a Great Aunt. Given that we have a very large cohort of nieces and nephews, it has taken some time for this happen! I am sure that our family is not alone, whilst the birth has been falling across the developed world for some time, it seems to really picked up pace in these recent generations. There are clearly many reasons for this, but in recent times I have found myself having conversations with different folk that have had a similar thread; in these conversations I have detected a sense of despair - why would you want to bring another generation into this world? These are everyday folk, with close happy families, with much going for them.

Unlike God in Genesis and former Treasurer Peter Costello, I am not going to urge you go forth and procreate. Looking around me, with the greatest respect, I don't think that's going to happen for the majority of us—and I include myself in that. The falling birth rate always seems to be spoken in regards ethics and economics; but I wonder if there are more important issues at play. Are those conversations I have been having indicative of a greater problem in our community—a lack of confidence, hope, faith?

Our story begins today with the words 'Abram went,' what one writer described as 'the boldest words in all literature.' The future was for Abram and later Abraham always seemed to be somewhat obscure, hazy; the scriptures tell us he was responding to God's promises, despite the facts which would suggest there was little chance of them actually happening. We are told that Abram was already seventy-five when 'he went' with the promise that he would become a great nation, and at this stage he had no children!

Paul picks up on this theme and it is the bedrock of his theology. Our heritage is founded on Abram believing that all would be well, that the promises would be fulfilled. But can we do that today? Is it not simply foolishness in the face of overwhelming evidence to believe that all will be well? And what of last week's journey with Jesus in the wilderness; are we not warned not to put God to the test? I have mentioned before that it is not our personal faith that carries us. For many of us that is far too much. Our faith is often fragile and few of us would be prepared to 'simply go!' What then does that mean, what does that say about our being made right with God?

Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus is classic John. He creates characters for us to engage with; over these coming weeks we will meet three of them. Today Jesus tells Nicodemus that it not all about signs—John calls miracles signs. You can't base your faith on these things, you must be born anew. And Nicodemus responds as most us would! As indeed most of us do. Nicodemus, along with all of us, is being challenged to see things differently; we are being emboldened.

This faith of ours is not about the miraculous—not in the simple way we might understand that. It is also too simplistic to say that I am made right with God simply because of my faith. Our faith is the faith of the Crucified One, and today's passage recalls the strange event in the

Book of Numbers when the people of Israel despaired in the wilderness—just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.

We are called to look upon the desolation of the cross and know that it is the source of our faith, our healing. We can barely conceive of hope in this way, but this is what we called to do. To have faith with the One Crucified has ramifications beyond our own concerns, sins, or own lack of confidence or hope. It is to know that renewal is possible. This is the message of that most famous passage: ‘For God so loved *the world* that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes *in him* may not perish but may have eternal life.’ There is a sense that this is not all about my faith or my salvation, but the salvation of the world and this, above all things, is perhaps the cause of much of the despair that we see around us.

Our preparedness, our boldness to live in such a way that reveals a future, is part of our Christian life. For some that might mean having a child, perhaps the most tangible sign of newness. Our children and young people bring a sense of vigour, dynamism. Without bringing them into the world we are indeed living out a self-fulfilling prophecy. For the rest of us it might mean a change in our thinking, about our faith, about our understanding of the environment and our place in it, about our personal finances—ensuring, perhaps, that the next generation have the opportunities that I, and many like me, took for granted.

I confess to regularly finding myself in Nicodemus’s shoes. All too often I ask ‘How can these things be?’ It is redolent of the words of Mary at the annunciation, ‘How can this be?’ We should remember that just as Christ was born of the Spirit, so are we, and that the grace of God is not bound by biology, let alone by our fears, misgivings or doubts.

That same spirit within us calls us on, working alongside the Holy Spirit who can bring life to the most unexpected places of all ... as revealed by the cross. Are we prepared to travel to those places, like Abram? This is perhaps our Lenten journey and calling. Amen.