
LIVING THE CROSS IN A CHANGING WORLD

LENTEN STUDIES

YEAR C

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“TRUST ON THE WAY”, SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR C

Genesis 15.1–12, 17–18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3.17–4.1; Luke 13.1–9

Genesis 15.1– 12, 17–18

¹⁵After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.’ ²But Abram said, ‘O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?’ ³And Abram said, ‘You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.’ ⁴But the word of the LORD came to him, ‘This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.’ ⁵He brought him outside and said, ‘Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ ⁶And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

⁷Then he said to him, ‘I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.’ ⁸But he said, ‘O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?’ ⁹He said to him, ‘Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon.’ ¹⁰He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. ¹¹And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

¹²As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. ¹⁷When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.

¹⁸On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To your

descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,

What a pivotal chapter this is for the development of the theology of faith. God had called Abram and Sarah to a pilgrimage of hope based only the promise of YHWH that called them out of their barrenness (Gen 11.30, 12.1–3). Their pilgrimage was based on no other basis than the promise of YHWH. But by chapter 15 the barrenness persists. The promise delays and has not overcome the barrenness. The evidence is all against the promise of God.

Faith in crisis

That crisis of faith is detailed in 1–6. God begins the conversation with a prophetic word, touching on Abraham's most fundamental fear (see Psalm 27 below on fear). Abraham and Sarah had despaired of having an heir through natural generation. They have appointed an heir to serve them in their lifetime and to bury and mourn then in their death. That was their Plan B. The command not to fear is matched by God's fundamental promise. The command 'Do not be afraid' disorients Abram who was fearful of his future. He thinks that call from barrenness was a false alarm. God gives a metaphor for His character (shield) and his action towards Abraham (reward). God protects, God gives but the promise comes in its own time.

All this sounds terribly transactional and Abram protests (2–3) in that vein: he resists the promise and the giver. Faith is not pious acquiescence but a deeply argued conviction for Abraham. Whatever YHWH promises as reward or protection is worthless without an heir. That promise must find fulfilment.

Faith lived

YHWH responds with another prophetic word, reciting the promise again (4–6). There is no coercion, no persuasion only the invitation to rely on the maker of the promise. Abram may turn away but he does not: he will not rely on what he can see and touch but on the God who turns barrenness into fruitfulness, the exhausted present into a buoyant future.

Abram's faith is not in a proposition but a person; he does not believe in God he believes God. He fixes his heart on God and rests back in the arms of the promise giver, the shield. Thus his faith is reckoned to him as righteousness. Righteousness means doing justice to a relationship in which one stands. It puts the question, 'what does this relationship require of me?' Righteousness is a relational word not a transactional word (keeping of accounts). God declares Abram righteous because he has done justice to the relationship with God; he trusts the promise.

The sacramental seal, faith confirmed

That faith is sealed in the ritual of covenant, a dramatic affirmation and enactment of the promise and YHWH's unfettered commitment to it (7–18). God's ever living

presence is in the covenant. It is not a ‘you do’ then ‘I do’ arrangement but God’s commitment of righteousness to the relationship with Abram.

This passage is critical for reading the New Testament, especially Paul, and understanding the nature of faith Galatians 3.7ff.

Questions: Put yourself in Abram and Sarah’s place. Meditate on that for a while. What are the barren areas of your life? Do you believe that God can turn barrenness into fruitfulness in your life? Explore the way faith works in your life. Compare it to this engagement of God and Abram. What do you find?

Psalm 27

Of David.

¹The LORD is my light and my salvation;

whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life;

of whom shall I be afraid?

²When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh—my adversaries and foes—they shall stumble and fall.

³Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.

⁴One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.

⁵For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock.

⁶Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

⁷Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!

⁸‘Come,’ my heart says, ‘seek his face!’

Your face, LORD, do I seek.
Do not hide your face from me.

Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help.
Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!

¹⁰If my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up.

¹¹Teach me your way, O LORD, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.

¹²Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence.

¹³I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.

¹⁴Wait for the LORD;

be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

The psalm is a song of trust by an individual. The first six verses of this psalm are a remarkable profession of faith in God and the next six are a prayer for help while the last two verses of the psalm return to the profession of faith. The sequence is important: faith does not spare the people of God from difficulties but it equips them to live with courage and hope whatever they face.

Trust in the Lord 1–6

Faith is personal; it must be ‘mine’ and not that of someone else. The psalmist trusts because of God’s character of light and strength and it is that that casts out fear. As in the whole Bible the opposite of faith is not doubt but fear. Fear shrivels humanity in all of us.

Faith is living in the presence of God. This psalm is permeated with the desire for God’s light to shine on the author’s life, for the beauty of his presence and for the sheer delight of seeing God’s face. The psalm celebrates the life of faith as opposed to the life of fear. The life of faith is not the safe or soft way but it is the way of life without fear. The crux is the anchoring of our lives in God alone.

The psalmist is surrounded by threats (2–3) and some of them violent. His enemies are after him (see comment on the Gospel) and he is in danger. However the psalmist is sure of God’s tender protection (4–6) and his spirit rises to worship the God who saves and protects.

Questions: What are your fears, things that threaten you? Will you let God shine light on them?

Troubled days 7–12

At verse 7 the psalmist turns to prayer (7–12) and these verses help us with understanding some aspects of prayer. It is embedded in grace (7–9a) and God’s desire to reveal his face to his servant; that is, to come into personal relations that touch the heart. Prayer knows that God comes to us even if our closest human relations abandon us; (10) but such love is not earned, we are not worthy of it, it comes in grace and mercy (9).

Prayer finds its natural home in the teachable spirit, not the proud wilful heart. Humility is the source of knowledge of God. And all the time the enemy is causing chaos and violence and corruption (12).

Questions: What do you do in the face of rejection and abandonment? What do you do when that rejection takes the form of lies and slander?

Trust in the Lord 13–14

The psalmist returns to his profession of trust (13–14). God will display his goodness to the psalmist and the psalmist waits, a very important word in the life of prayer. Impatience, anger and fear dissolve trust and suck the oxygen out of prayer.

Questions: The psalmist makes seven requests of God to be present in his life. Can you find them? They might form the basis for your personal prayer during Lent.

What characteristics of God does the psalmist rely on in trouble? What makes this psalm a suitable response to the story of Abram and Sarai?

Philippians 3. 17–4.1

¹⁷Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. ¹⁹Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. ²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.⁴¹Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Imitating Christ's humility is a central theological theme of the epistle and crucial to Paul's understanding of the Christian life as having the mind of Christ (2:1–11). The humility of looking to the interests of others as Jesus did at such cost informs Paul's understanding of the Gospel. When Paul calls on the Philippians to join in imitating him (17), it may sound conceited but the call arises out of the fact that this Jesus has taken a firm hold on his life (3:7–16). Paul's life may be far from perfect and complete but Christ has an unshakeable grip on his spirit and imagination.

Imitating the crucified Messiah

The apostle is a role model whose example others may imitate. The Christian life is not so much a set of rules as a life lived in such a way that the life of Christ shines through. We have to learn to do that as an apprentice learns a craft. So the Christian leaders in Philippi imitate Paul and should themselves be good examples for imitation to others.

Questions: Has the crucified Christ taken such hold of your life that others might be able to imitate Him in you?

Another way 18–19

Others choose a different path (18–19). Some Christians are living lives of self-indulgence: they did not leave their propensity for gluttony, sexual immorality and greediness at the door of the church when they first came. They did not repent to use

Jesus' term (see comment on the Gospel). They are enemies of the cross (Philippians 2:1–11) because they deny the One whose humility and simplicity set them free.

Questions: How do we end up on the wrong road? What are the warning signs we may have missed?

Sharing Christ's beauty

In contrast, those who imitate Paul and share the mind of Christ may confidently expect to share Christ's beauty and life (20–21). That is our citizenship; it is the commonwealth to which we belong and in which we share privileges and responsibilities. We await in hope the transformation of our humanity into the glory of the risen Christ (Philippians 2:6–11). If we suffer with him in humility we shall share his glory. His pattern will be our pattern. Thus Paul encourages his friends to stand firm (4:1). They shall be made whole, persons of beauty. As they are, they are his joy and delight.

Questions: Do we live out our citizenship taking its responsibilities seriously? How does the hope of the transformation in Christ drive our present living?

Luke 13.1–9

¹³At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?' ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?' ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'

⁶Then he told this parable: 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷So he said to the gardener, "See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?"' ⁸He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."'

As we have noted Luke is a connected story in which each part contributes to the meaning of all the other parts. So reading snippets as we do in church is fraught with the possibilities of misunderstanding. The passage today is a part of Luke that begins at 9.51 and ends at 19.48 and that tells of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, continuing some of the great themes of the birth stories and the Galilean ministry but often in surprising ways. Some of the themes that bind the story and we, the readers, might look out for are the coming of salvation for all people, that Mary's son would be the cause of division in Israel, that he must suffer, die and rise which will be his exodus.

The reality of judgment

Luke 13.1–9 concludes a section (12.1–13.9) that begins in crisis as the leaders decide to stalk Jesus and look for ways to bring him down (11.53–54). So Jesus seeks to tell his disciples, the crowd and anyone who might be interested in following him what this hostility means for their life. They must learn to reorient their lives according to the understanding of God's nature and God's kingdom purpose. In Jesus God is bringing both salvation and judgment. Jesus wants people to hear how to respond to that reading of the situation. So themes like hypocrisy, love of possessions, anxiety over the future, fearless public confession, watchfulness, and judgment find their place in the discussion.

The warnings regarding the coming judgement that began in 12.1–3 reach their climax here. It is sometimes hard to think of Jesus as a prophet who spoke words of judgement but the evidence is unmistakable and clear. We do, however, have to put Jesus in his context as a prophet to his own people who were living under the Romans and looking for God's coming kingdom to throw off the colonising yoke. Many were considering the option of violence to bring about God's kingdom. Jesus sees the looming disaster that this mindset will bring about and demands repentance from it towards trusting that God was bringing the kingdom in his ministry.

Jesus rejects the notion that somehow we could interpret violence and random accidents as the punishment of God (1–5). Jesus reads their bringing of this report to him about Pilate's action as a form of self-justification that expresses the human view that "they deserve it" and of course "we do not". Judgment in his interlocutors' view is reserved for those whose sin sets them apart from "us". Jesus does not reject the view that disobedience to God's love and mercy will finally lead to judgment. He simply rejects the notion that those who encounter disaster and misfortune have been specially marked out by God. They have not.

But there is a real judgment that comes to us every day of our lives as God addresses us with the call of Jesus to follow the kingdom in all we do. God brings us up short when we are disobedient to God's love and mercy and justice in our lives and in that confrontation calls us to our commitment to the Gospel. And the way to approach that is repentance, taking up God's agenda in the Kingdom and living our lives under mercy and grace: accordingly in love, peace and justice.

However, if his hearers did not repent from their thoughts of violence they could expect that they would experience the full effects of Roman violence in murder and destruction. Sadly, it all came too true.

Questions: Reflect on the difference between living a life of penance (doing prescribed religious acts) and a life of repentance. Describe the difference.

Reflect on a time when a person or event has stopped you in your tracks. Maybe it has forced you to turn in another direction or maybe you refused the chance to change. Reflect on that. What difference did it make in your life?

Hope and grace for the fruitless tree

The point of the parable (6–9) is that judgment is averted, not because we are pious, holy or some other self-reported religious characteristic, but because of God's mercy and grace. The tree is unfruitful and yet still he intercedes with the owner of the fig tree to let it live. Mercy characterises God, not capricious destruction. On the other hand fruit bearing characterises disciples (3.7–9, 6.43–45, 8.4–15). Fruit bearing arises out of repentance and the stories in the Gospel tell us what the fruit is (Luke 6, 12 for example)

Questions: What does repentance mean in your life? What are some of the fruits we should bear? What changes would that make to your life?

Further reflections

Journey and pilgrimage are themes this Sunday but the theme is not the beginning of the pilgrimage but what being a pilgrim might look like as we exercise our commitment to the Gospel.

So Abram and Sarai will learn what it means to exercise trust in their journey with God who journeys with them. They face fear and disappointment and look to Plan B.

The Psalmist learns how to exercise confidence in the face of ferocious fears and opposition. St Paul has learnt what the terrible temptations are for disciples to forgo commitment to the Gospel and seek another, easier way.

Jesus teaches us that pilgrims live a life of repentance always seeking God's agenda for the Kingdom of Christ for this world.

Questions: Reflect on your journey so far. How would you assess it?