

I wonder what things we cling too?

One of the reasons I like the 40 bags in 40 days lent challenge, is that it makes me look at things I have accumulated over the year ... from strange things with no intrinsic value that I 'might' use to special cards I have received during the year – it makes me ask 'why am I holding on'!

A few years ago I helped a colleague of mine move out of a vicarage he and his wife had lived in for 20 years. In the corner of his office were 5 cardboard boxes he had never opened in all those 20 years. He had packed them, moved them and never opened them – but could also not bear to let go of them.

What compels us to hold onto things and not look at them, or even open the box?

The truth is however it is not just old photos or memorabilia we keep locked in boxes – we also have values and truths which we box into our persona which are often just there and never unpacked. Sometimes we have beliefs that just sit in the background which may stop us from moving forward or letting go. Assumptions about what is right and good in our world view which we hold onto beyond reason or new knowledge *because 'it has always happened this way'!*

In our gospel reading, Nicodemus comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness and he comes to Jesus with a set of convictions about what is real, what is possible: “*We know that you are a teacher come from God...*”

Of course, initially, this strikes us as promising. However, it is precisely what Nicodemus knows that becomes a stumbling block -- or the values and beliefs he clings to -- and that knowledge obscures his ability to fully hear and receive what Jesus is teaching.

Indeed, Nicodemus is reduced to outbursts of disbelief and astonishment:

- “How can anyone be born after having grown old? (4a)
- “How can these things be?” (9)

Though he comes under cover of night, the deeper darkness of unbelief obscures the vision of Nicodemus. In a sense, Nicodemus has his own boxes in the corner of his faith study – on the one hand he wants Jesus to be the messiah, he even believes it – but he finds it much harder to unpack the boxes which hold him in his current location.

I have been thinking about this as I prepared for our annual meeting today. While it is my second AGM at St Philip's last year, I had only been in post a few weeks, and so it all seemed strange – but now we have journeyed together for a year. There are things we have come to know and even believe about each other, and other things that still surprise us.

Today we celebrate our life as a parish, the things we have achieved, the people we have welcomed, as well as those we have farewelled. We look at the work we have done, the events we have shared, the funds we have raised, the mission we have supported – but we also dare to think about what the future might look like. What we might hope to achieve this coming year.

We want this parish to grow and to flourish – *creating a community where we live the love of Christ* – is what we say in our mission statement. But I wonder what we might need to let go of to achieve this, and what are the things which are hard for us to believe, or let go of, and so become barriers to our growth.

We are given many promises - by and about - God which are often hard to believe, or even hear as assurance. For Nicodemus the promises of God seem nonsensical, as they do

too many today, and had done before him (Maybe you remember how Sarah laughed when she was told at 90 she would have a child!) The question then is how can we possibly receive God's promises if they do not fit our understanding?

But Nicodemus is not the only image we are offered in our readings, while Nicodemus found it hard to hear the new way Jesus was offering and struggled to let go of the beliefs which he stored away for safe keeping; we also hear the story of Abraham who is able to see beyond his present situation, beyond his experience and knowledge and step fully out in faith to respond to God.

God promises Abram that he would be the father of a large nation -- a promise that as we will see in subsequent chapters is rather preposterous given the fact that both Abraham and Sarah are far beyond the years of having a child. Moreover, God will protect them wherever they go, by blessing those that are good to them and cursing those that are not.

So how does Abraham respond? He simply believes! He doesn't allow his personal experience, or knowledge or baggage – or even logic to get in his way.

When God says he will be the father of many nations, he believed!

I find Abraham and Sarah perplexing at times as they seem to continue to grow in faith and trust – beyond what often seems reasonable.

This story from Genesis speaks strongly to all who want to know that discipleship and faith are certain. The journey may be long, with joys and sorrows. But it is journey filled with the promise of God's presence to show us the way. To allow our spiritual life to be a FROG – an ability to Fully Rely On God!

But what does this say to us – enter Paul and our Lenten pilgrimage.

When Paul writes to the Romans, he is inviting a reflection of faith and discipleship. Paul begins by pointing out that we all ancestors of Abraham and calls on Christians to emulate the faith of Abraham, whose firm conviction in God moved him to trust God in spite of obstacles found in this world. For Abraham faith is an active act of confidence in God who is always faithful and keeps his promises. It is a reminder that we are called to suspend our logical calculations and to trust in God who calls us at times to venture into the unknown.

These things are also the invitation of our Lenten discipleship. Our Lent journey is a time to reflect. To take time to consider the roots of our faith and how it informs who we are. It is a time when we are invited to challenge those things which in our own lives which are obstacles to our faith. Those things like Nicodemus which limit our ability to hear and see what God is trying to do. Those practices and beliefs which we cling onto, like boxes in the corner of our study which limit our ability to move forward. For each of us these things might be different – but quite often they are related as Paul says to things which to us are logical and yet to God are not!

The verse of comfort which we hear in our readings today is of course John 3: 16 “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.” What I find so fascinating about these words is that in many ways they are the hardest of all for our logical minds to believe, and yet they are the heart of our lives of faith. For at the heart of this text is love. At the heart of our Lenten journey is love. At the heart of Abrahams journey is love. Even at the heart of Nicodemus questions is love.

For it is love which enables us to step out, to let go of boxes, of things which are barriers – which allows us to take risks which make no logical sense. It is love of God which holds our faith. It is the love of God which will help us grow and take risks as a parish.

So as we reflect on our life as a parish today – as we continue our Lenten journey - let us take note of those whose courage has gone before us – and in love may we let go and step out in faith. Amen.