



Sermon preached by Revd Peter McEnhill on 25th February 2024

Readings: *Genesis 17: 1-7,15-16; Romans 4: 13-25; Mark 7: 31-38*

Lent II

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh lord, our strength and our redeemer. In the name of the father and of the son and of the holy spirit. Amen.

It is a great delight, privilege and joy to be here with you once again this morning after so many years passing since I have been in this sanctuary, and to see what an absolutely wonderful, stunning job you have made of the renovation. It really is a beautiful worship space and it is a joy and a privilege to be here with you, I very much treasure that. I also treasure the opportunity to journey this part of the way to Easter with you. You are on your Lenten journey, making your way through the season so that we can prepare ourselves, and you can prepare yourself as a community, to celebrate the joy and the triumph of Easter.

There are of course a couple of journeys in our readings this morning. Abraham is continuing his journey, hoping against hope he believed that he would become the father of many nations, says Paul. Christ is on his final journey towards Jerusalem, and he begins to open up to his disciples the way of suffering death and the cross. The heights, the wonder, the mystery of the transfiguration has just happened, and now Christ descends from the mountain top, down on the path towards Jerusalem. As they physically descend, the mood of the gospel also descends. The sunlit uplands of Galilee and the crowds and the healings and the Miracles are in the background, and the mood becomes more somber, more dark, as Christ begins to open up the way that lies ahead. Gradually Mark will strip Christ of everything; the crowds peel away, we know that even some of the closer group peel away one by one, until finally Peter denies Christ: everything is stripped from Christ and he faces the cross alone. Peter loses hope, Peter loses trust. It kind of depends upon your view of the incarnation, how you view what Christ was saying to the disciples when he spoke about the way of suffering, death and resurrection. The gospels, of course, are looking back at what happened then, but what is your understand of these sayings of Christ about the resurrection at this point in time? Did Jesus know as an absolute certainty that resurrection would happen, or was he trusting that God would vindicate him and bring him through to the other side? Was he hoping against hope in the provenance of God? I kind of think that unless we evacuate the incarnation of true humanity, this is the faithful belief and trust of Christ, rather than a certainty. We know that he believed in the resurrection, and not every Jew at that time believed in resurrection. So perhaps we can give Peter a little latitude in perhaps not understanding that this was a stonewall certainty: that it was a trusting and a believing and a hoping Christ on to the way of death, knowing that God would indeed bring him through to that other side. First century Jews did not routinely believe that people rose from the dead. When people were lost to them, they were lost in the same way that we feel people are lost to us when they die. So Peter perhaps couldn't bring himself to accept or to trust or to believe that Jesus would come through the other side. Faith is trusting and hoping the promises of God, and that's at the heart of the Abraham story too. If you remember God calls Abraham from the Chaldees when he's 75 and promises him descendants and land. Abraham's now 99 and he's hoping against hope. As Paul says, he believed that he would become the father of many nations. Against everything that he understood to be possible in the normal circumstances of life, because he was 99: and probably even more crucially, Sarah was around 89 or 90. However, when you think about the promise to Abraham, believing in its fulfillment was always going to be a matter of hoping and trusting in God; in the nature of things you can't ever see that you will have descendants of innumerable number. That's going to take some time to work out, isn't it? All that Abraham could see was the first true beginnings of that in Isaac. He maybe had already lost some hope when he tried to circumvent God's plan with Hager and Ishmael, and the story of Abraham of course is a story of someone who occasionally loses hope. Ishmael is one example, duplicity in Egypt another, but Paul makes him an icon of our faith because of that humanity, that having to win through to a trust and God in difficult situations. Hoping against hope that God would fulfill his promises, and this, Paul said, was entrusted to him as righteousness. God calls into being through Abraham a new community, the

people that will become Israel, God's people in the world. Will Storrar, the Scottish practical theologian, talks about the people of God being an acoustic community, called into being by God's call and word, and although of course Israel has an ethnic dimension to it as it works out through time, in its origins it is an acoustic community, called into being by Abraham's faithful response to God: hoping against hope in a difficult world that God would fulfill the promises that he would never see. Abraham would never see descendants who were kings, or descendants as innumerable as the stars. Abraham died with only Isaac as his offspring, and the only land that he ever owned in the promised land was the land it was buried in, but he believed and trusted that God would fulfill his promises, hoping against hope. Paul is writing to that community in Rome, a small Christian community, we don't know how many, but probably no more than 100 or 150 or so, a small house community, and he's saying that just as Abraham was credited with righteousness through faith, so too are we credited with righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ. It is the same process, and in that way, if you've been reading any New Testament scholarship in the last 30 years will so, you know there's a new perspective on this central text as to what it means. The consensus is that the promise made to Israel is opened up and made available to Gentiles, who are included in the promises of God. They don't replace Israel but they become engrafted into God's promised action in Christ, which is the fulfillment of the work that God began in Abraham. Sometimes we forget when we read these letters, because they're so important to us, they are normal correspondence. Think of that Roman community or the community in Ephesus, or the community in Galatia which Paul writes to - tiny, tiny little church communities, and here is Paul saying to them "You are the fulfillment of God's purposes begun in Abraham, you have been engrafted through your faith and Christ into this story". And they are in Rome, with all the temples to the pagan world around them, and a bustling metropolis that is hardly aware of them. It's completely counter-intuitive. Paul is telling them you are part of God's community, called into being, to be a light to the world. And they hope against hope, against all that surrounded them: they trusted in God and they changed their world. Now if there was such a thing as a first century sociologist looking at the likelihood of that happening, that these small Christian communities dotted in isolated towns and cities around the Mediterranean, that have all the things that were happening - of all the cults of all the powers, of the power of Rome and the philosophies from Greece - that it was this one that was going to change the world, no one would have thought it. Hoping against hope, it was entrusted to them as righteousness, and they were the fulfillment of God's purpose in Christ.

We are part of the living continuity of that story begun with Abraham. You are Abraham's spiritual descendants in faith. Here we are, journeying through Lent, church communities that are struggling in every measurement that we can consider, and we're wondering what the future is for us and for others, and yet we have this gift, a gift of God's promise to us and Christ. The question for us is to hope against hope that God will hold us fast in Christ, and that he will hold his church fast. The thing that keeps ministers such as myself sane at night is that ultimately this doesn't depend upon us; it is God's church, and he will work out his purposes in history through it. New forms of the church will come and old forms will pass away, for that has been the story. What we believe has been the permanent form of the church as we knew it is but one iteration of the church. and the church will continue. God is calling to himself a people in the world that began with Abraham, that found its fulfillment in the story of Christ on the way to the cross, calling people to follow him in that path, will work out its purposes in history. This is the promise of God, and this is what we place our hope and our faith in.

I wish you uncommon well on your journey of faith and I know that God will go with you on that journey and lead you. Wherever it may go, be of good heart and of courage, and be filled with hope in the promises of God.

May God bless our hearts and minds, this preaching of his word, and may he increase therein our understanding and our following. This we ask in Jesus' name, Amen

Peter McEnhill

25th February 2024