

I pray that I may speak in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Having Faith in something or someone is not just important it is essential in every one's life. Each of our readings tells us about the importance of having or not having Faith.

There are 2 parts to our reading from Genesis. In the first part v 1-6 Abraham seems to be having doubts that God will carry out his promise that he will have an heir of his body and he has been obliged to appoint Eleazer as his heir. YHWH reiterates his original promise and shows him the stars as a demonstration of how numerous his descendants will be. There would probably been about 8,000 visible stars from that part of the Middle East. The direct vision of God which is quite rare in the OT convinces him and he believes. The phrase “reckoned it to him as righteousness” is rightly thought by many to be one of the most significant in the whole of scripture and has been taken together with other instances of Abraham's Faith as an expression of Abraham's readiness to trust God's promises and so it for us who have faith in the promises of Jesus Christ.

The next part of the story is concerned with the promise of the land rather than Abraham's progeny. He is demanding to know how God is going to fulfil his promise. What follows is a curious but solemn ritual which does not conform to anything known from elsewhere although the cutting of animals into two is reminiscent of some covenant rituals. The animals are those specified for sacrifice in the laws of the OT.

The smoking fire pot and the flaming torch represent YHWH passing between the two rows of animals symbolizing the binding of himself to keep the covenant. The covenant contains a comprehensive list of the peoples who have preceded Israel in the land and describes the boundaries in very grand terms some of which Israel never occupied. But this covenant with Abraham who represents Israel is unconditional unlike the covenant on Sinai. The Jews rightly identify with this heritage but their claim on the land has today become very political.

Paul in writing to the Philippians wanted them not to conform to the common practices of the day but to be fellow imitators of Christ in living out their Faith. It would appear that there were some in the local church who were not setting a good example because their minds are set on earthly things. It is right to want to be good citizens but our citizenship is in heaven. Christians, who because of the state cult and social pressures, were participating in meals connected with public sacrifices and so were compromising their faith and reducing Christianity to one among other acceptable philosophies.

Philo, a contemporary of Paul, spoke of the Patriarch's as being sojourners on earth, because heaven was their native land. All Christians are in a sense sojourners. For us it's not merely a concept, we recognised earth as our current abode and heaven as our final destination but the Kingdom of God and Christ's authority is already in the world and at work in us.

This concept of citizenship was just as important then as it is now. I have a British Passport because I was born and have a birth certificate to prove it however I also have my baptism certificate that proves that I am part of the household of faith and citizen of heaven. So I hold dual citizenship. My son Paul and his wife Lindsay have lived in Paris for nearly 15 years and are now having to seek French Citizenship so that they can continue to live and work in France.

Paul valued his Roman citizenship, the people of Philippi were citizens of a Roman colony in Greece so they were part of the Roman Commonwealth. Countries of our Commonwealth share much of our values and approach to life as a democracy. So it's not just a label because it affects and shapes the way in which we live. This conforming happens to all who are citizens of the Kingdom of God. This transformation occurs as we allow the Holy Spirit to work in our lives. But we have to have faith and trust in God for the power to work effectively in us as we journey through life, and when we do, we find the strength to stand firm in the Lord.

The Gospel story from Luke finds Jesus on his own journey towards Jerusalem and the events of Easter. Here he is in Perea which is under Jurisdiction of Herod Antipas on the eastern side of the Jordan. Herod the great had had 4 sons and the kingdom had been divide to 4 tetrarchs. He is the one who had John the Baptist beheaded. Some Pharisees’ warn Jesus of his dangers and Jesus’ reply allows Luke to give his understanding of the significance of the journey and its conclusion. Jesus through his healing ministry has already been sowing the seeds of the Kingdom. For Luke Jesus is the long promised prophet of whom Moses spoke through what he did God was perfecting him. What would happen today and tomorrow would lead to a third day when Jesus will finish his work. Jesus was the agent of God’s renewal of Israel so he must, like many of the prophets before suffer and nowhere other than Jerusalem. Luke begins and ends at the temple in this city. What completes his work is the cycle of events in Jerusalem – the passion, resurrection and ascension which will enable his exaltation and the gift of the Holy Spirit on his people.

No wonder Jesus laments over the city as he will do again as he enters it, for he sees her rushing onwards to complete her history of refusal to listen to God’s agents. She will choose instead to follow the path that will lead to her own destruction. Jesus is seen here as speaking as God’s wisdom who reaches out to Israel with a tenderness that expresses her feminine concern. He reflects her gentleness and desire to draw humanity into a relationship with God. But Jerusalem rejected him as do so many of this generation today.

In our first of our lent course session this week we encountered 3 Christians: a farmer, a painter and a care worker all from Sussex who spoke about what it meant to hear and respond to the call of God in our lives. Many live their lives without recognising that God wants us to discover life in all its fullness, missing out on the benefits of being a citizen of the Kingdom of God. We are all graciously accepted by him and he wants us to assist him in bringing in the harvest.

Amen. [1149]