

Trinity VIII 2019 (Year C P14/OT19)

I can vividly remember walking home through the streets of Truro late one night as a teenager, when all of the streetlights went out at midnight, as they did in those far off days. I can remember now the extraordinary experience of the darkness giving way to the illumination of stars and the Milky Way. It was one of those moments we all experience in life which are unforgettable. For me it was also a defining moment of Faith, one which at that moment I couldn't vocalise, but I just felt so at one with creation and thus with God, whose love is at the heart of everything – visible and invisible. That is why, when I see the astonishing images of the very edges of the universe, I see the wonder of God's love – boundless and beyond our understanding.

What do you think Abram's thoughts were when, in the language of Genesis, God '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.'* Abram is on a journey towards the certainty of faith, which also involves the strong urge to pass it on to the generations that follow through his heirs. Did Abram experienced what I felt when he gazed at the stars in the heavens?

Faith is certainly at the centre of all three readings, and I think that what they provide us with is the sense that, although the Dawkins and Hitchens of this world might pour scorn on faith which they see as divorced from evidence, in fact it seems to me that they are the ones who seek to make life 'a valley of dry bones' as Ezekiel described in his famous passage (*Ezekiel 37: 1-14*). As Jane Williams the theologian writes, Faith **can** be a step into risk and uncertainty, but it is chosen and calculated based on what is already known and experienced within the length and breadth of salvation history. Further evidence surrounds us. I have mentioned my sense of the presence of God within creation that night in Truro, but each of us will have some moment, perhaps almost unrecognised, when we became aware of God within our lives.

The account of Abraham is an editorially loosely put together sequence about journeying. It is not a biography in any shape way or form, other than to illustrate humanity's growing awareness of God. From this awareness, faithfulness will develop. We are told of Abraham's wealth, yet there is a nagging sense of something missing. Why is a naturally born child to Sarah and he so important? The narrative implies that God has this same concern, and we find that the starry heights of heaven enabled him to 'believe the Lord.' From Ur of the Chaldees, Egypt and Canaan, complete with wealth, Abraham realises that even the Promised Land is not his true home, but merely a sign of greater possibilities within life. As the Letter to the Hebrews puts it - 'faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.' The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews gives us a strong flavour of the fact that the faithfulness of the Patriarchs and matriarchs points towards the fulness of our journeying in Christ.

What does this mean to us as Christians?

Try, for the moment, to forget Brexit, the lamentable state of our politics, Europe, Trump's America, Corbyn, Johnson, Cummings, the global economy, climate warming et al.

‘Do not be afraid,’ says Jesus. The most important thing for us is growing in relationship with God, through prayer, study and sacrament, in order to allow our journeying in Faith to overflow from our lives into the lives of all we meet. God calls us to live Kingdom lives - true treasure. The Kingdom Life turns the current obsession with money, power and self on its head – this ‘so-called’ reality, is no reality at all, but the hollow husk of the shadow of spiritual death. It leads nowhere.

Jesus calls us to live in expectation of awaiting, in that wonderful imagery of the Song of Songs, the Bridegroom’s voice. This expectation draws us, if we allow it, to proclaim to the world the only true reality which really counts: to know and reveal the overflowing grace of God in all that we do.

This is as much to do with transforming society as the increasing burden of listening to the voices of those who shout the loudest within it. **We** are called to speak out against injustice, division or wickedness – this is one of our charisms. We are to agitate for the Kingdom of God, but this must never be through the narrowness of the sorts of discourse we see currently in so many aspects of Western society. Ours is a bigger picture, one that is currently deeply unpopular, yet is urgently and desperately needed by the world in which we live.

Our **greatest** call is to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. This we are called to do, both in season and out of season, as the Ordinal puts it. Make no mistake about it, Christianity is clinging to the edges of Western society, which is increasingly seeking to eradicate the very essence of what created it. In the face of the howling wilderness of secularism, our calling is to proclaim that the transformative love of God is available to all, We are called to make known that in Jesus Christ we are saved from the fall into narrow self-introspection – the basis of what we call sin. In the knowledge of the self-giving love of Jesus Christ, we are called to proclaim that, in the words of Charles Spurgeon, the great 19th century preacher, ‘the price for our sins has been paid in full, and the receipt is nailed to the cross.’ Although this language may seem alien, it points to none other than the fullness of life and the true answer to the problems which beset our society and, indeed, humanity. The name of Jesus Christ must be on our lips when we talk to people, even if we face derision or hostility – in season and out of season – calling people to join in the most exciting journey they will ever undertake. This is none other than the very essence, the fountain of all that exists – the love of God.

Today’s Gospel is challenging for us. It questions our priorities and it questions the motivation for our religious actions. Let it be an inspiration for us. Let it renew our dedication to do God’s will – here and now.



Image from the Hubble Space Telescope

Genesis 15:1-6

After 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.' But Abram said, 'O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abram said, 'You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.' But 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.' He 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.' And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.'

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

Luke 12: 32-40

'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

'Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

'But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.'