

## SERMON 25 FEBRUARY LENT 2

Three readings today! Actually in some churches you would always have three. I wanted to use all three because there is a clear thread, it seems to me, between them. But now I am left trying to draw that thread out from so many others that are part of the story, so it has the potential to become rather confusing. I hope I can find my way/ our way, through without getting lost in the undergrowth.

I wonder what you might name, in general, as the overarching theme of the relationship between God and God's creation, which, of course, covers not just humankind but all of life, everything in the world around us, beneath our feet, high above us. Maybe you would name salvation, love, justice, renewal? All these are true. What the readings today point us to is the fundamental fact of covenant, of God's promise made, firstly to Abram and Sarai, and through them and the extraordinary fulfilment of God's word to them in the birth of their son Isaac, to all the succeeding generations. This is the promise that is reiterated to Jacob, to Joseph, to Moses, with all their difficulties. It held, still, by Jewish people everywhere. It is the promise that we inherit, just as the disciples came to understand that Jesus had come for everyone, not just the Jews. Paul carried this message to Gentile people over a wide swathe of the countries around.

God's promise is the foundation of our faith. Along with it goes God's faithfulness to that promise. What is the promise? It is about relationship. We heard how God addressed Abram: "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you." It was a life-changing moment: Abram became Abraham, Sarai became Sarah. They were to be the father and mother of nations, of kings – these two aged people who had thought their life was waning. The sign of the covenant was to be circumcision – a practice that was known in other cultures too, such as Egypt, and for some Aboriginal tribes here. But for the Jews it became their defining mark. They have borne it through all kinds of challenges, right into the holocaust when, for outsiders, their mark was changed to a star of David as they struggled to hold firm to God's seemingly now unbelievable promise to them.

But let's go back a little. God's promise led to new beginnings for Abraham and Sarah. God's promise often does that. Abram and Sarai had a new identity. Today, in a world where many people leave their homeland, their culture and settle in a new place, often it seems easier for them to acquire a new name too, to make it easier to become known. Here we have Francis, we have Henry, we had Michelle and Alex, and I am sure many of us know several others too. Amelia Koh Butler, whom many of you know, has her own story about this, which I am sure she wouldn't mind me telling. You may know it already. Amelia comes from a Chinese culture. She changed her last

name from Kok to Koh when she was disowned by her family for becoming a Christian. She has been Me Li and joined them together adding an "A" at each end to become Amelia. When she married Terry she added Butler. Our names can tell a story, all of which is important, all of which is held in God's keeping as we journey on. God's promise is not limited by our name or our place. So, this reading from Genesis is a very important one for many migrant peoples and we can hear many stories of faithfulness from them.

Promises have two sides to them of course. What the scriptures tell us is the story of generation after generation of men and women who have often failed to keep their side of the covenant with God; whose faith and trust has weakened, who have fallen away because the struggle to keep faith seemed too much as circumstances challenged them. And it hasn't always just been a falling away, but sometimes an outright rejection as the temptations of power, of quick reward, of an easier life took hold. There are many stories in the scriptures of injustice, of violence, murder even, committed by those who looked to themselves and their own interests and turned their backs on God. In many stories we hear of God's anger at their rejection. In many stories we hear about how prophets called people back and pleaded with God to turn aside from anger. And God did. God remained faithful, even though the people did not. We know for ourselves how costly it is to hold true when we are rejected or are not appreciated or understood; when people don't take the trouble to think beyond themselves. While we can't make God into a human, imagining a little from our own perspective perhaps helps us to see things from a different angle and to thank God that God is not like us!

Abraham and Sarah responded in faith and in hope, and so things happened. The story grew and grew and as it grew, it evolved, as things do. But the basics remained the same: God's promise and the people's response. Out of those struggles came the Law, needed to hold the people secure in the practice of their faith. Think of all the difficulties Moses had trying to hold the people together on their years of journeying towards this far-off Promised Land. So many stories followed once they got there: prophets, priests and kings. Exile and return. The destruction of the Temple which was so core to their faith, then its rebuilding. All this took centuries. The promise of God held them even when they failed. They then also looked forward to seeing how it would all be fulfilled in the future.

We can move on to Paul and his letter to the church in Rome. Here he is, pointing the people back to Abraham and his faith in God's promise. That was a long way back, even then. He is addressing Christians whose background was one of life lived with law, Roman law and Jewish Law. Much was invested in doing the right thing. It is what society dictated to them. Paul calls them back to understand that God's promised relationship with people is discovered by faith, by

grace. He re-tells the story of Abraham and the hope that his faith in God's promise gave to him. He was, as Paul says, "fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised." What Paul was dealing with was something we can perhaps identify with too: the tension between those who find righteousness in abiding by the Law, thinking that if they do everything in a way they deem is correct according to the rules, then all will be well. They don't want to get on the wrong side of the authorities. Nor do we. This is very challenging today when many decisions that are made in our name by governments, even by the church, seem to compromise what we believe is life-giving. We only have to think of the care of our planet and its resources; the injustice and suffering of those whose are marginalised by birth, by circumstance, by ill-health or disability, by bad choices to name but a few. And we are part of the global village, connected instantly by the internet, aware of the kind of rhetoric that easily diminishes people and accelerates tension. These are very real struggles for us as we wonder what a Christ-like response should be, while, at the same time, the scale of it can be quite overwhelming and it is tempting to look away. We are tempted by the security of believing we know what is right and what is wrong, and choosing the "right" response, but it can be a dangerous security. If we hope to see how trusting in God's faithful promise can mean something for us, we cannot close our eyes. It was Karl Barth who wrote a very influential commentary on Romans who said that everyone attempting to preach should have the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. That tells us that we don't find God's promise just by reading about it in the Bible but by seeing God's faithfulness in the world around us. It is so easy to forget that the God whose promise remains true is God who knows each one by name; God who goes on calling people into relationships of trust through times of change; God whom we know in Christ, whose hands and feet we are called to be. God's promise always holds new life when all has seemed dead. God who is always moving forwards into the future, not just by doing what is right and acceptable within society, but what is right in the life of faithful discipleship.

As we think about all of this, it doesn't take much for us to recall Jesus' struggles with the scribes and the Pharisees who were so critical about his seeming lack of observance of the details of the Law. "No, you can't heal someone on the Sabbath", "No, you can't pluck ears of corn when you are hungry on the Sabbath". In effect: "No, you shouldn't be going about healing and teaching the people like this, it's too radical. It's not what law-abiding religious people do". I wonder what you heard most clearly in the reading we listened to from Mark's gospel. In it, Jesus tells his disciples for the first time that the Son of Man, as he describes himself, will be rejected by the chief priests and teachers of the law and be killed and after three days rise again. Just before this reading Jesus has asked them "Who do you say that I am?". Peter has answered, "You are the Messiah". For the first time, this is stated, and when something is said out loud it becomes a defining moment. Jesus' following this with his statement about what will happen to him moves everything around to face towards Jerusalem. From here on in, Jesus and his disciples are heading in that

direction. In a sense it is almost like discovering a wonderful new destination, a place full of promise, and then finding that you have turned off onto another road where the signposts point to a bleak and frightening pace instead. The great hope and promise that the last weeks and months seemed to offer, with healing, renewal and inspiration now appears to be misplaced. Peter couldn't deal with that and protested. "Get behind me Satan" was Jesus' stunning response to human concerns not Godly ones.

What did you hear in the verses that were read? I expect it may have been the familiar words about taking up one's cross, denying oneself, losing one's life in order to find it. All this can feel like a command we would rather not hear. It seems to make our discipleship conditional on accepting a great weight of dark struggle and self-denial, when mostly we would rather frame the good news of Jesus in more life-affirming terms. There are plenty of paradoxes about the journey of faith, and this is one of them. Losing in order to find, dying in order to live. This was indeed a reality for many of the people who heard Mark's gospel read to them back then. They knew about persecution. This gospel was written at much the same time as the Romans destroyed the Temple, ransacking Jerusalem, scattering the people. It was the end of the old priestly order for ever. Taking up their cross had a real meaning for them, just as trusting in God's promise and discovering life and relationship through everything was also a reality.

What about for us? It is a fact that hundreds of millions of Christians face persecution for their faith today. They will hear these words of Jesus differently from us in our religious freedom and security, even if we are surrounded by apathy or suspicion, and, in some cases anger at the failings of the institutional churches. This still doesn't hit us in the face very often. We are more likely to feel somewhat embarrassed to call ourselves Christian because we think people may identify us as people who are deluded, taken in by a myth that bears no relation to reality in today's world. We can become ashamed. The term "Christian" is loaded nowadays and we don't want to be identified with its more way-out bearers, like, just for an example, some of the right-wing evangelicals in the U.S, some of whom have been denigrating courageous high school students who have been calling for an end to the influence of the NRA and the sale of assault weapons to private individuals.

Where does this leave us? It asks us, I think, to hear Jesus' words not so much as command but as a call to make choice. The choice isn't just based on what we see in Jesus and want to be part of. It is also made remembering God's faithfulness in the promise of relationship with those who become God's people. When we are baptised, the sign of the cross is traced in the water of renewal on our forehead. The cross bears enormous significance for who we are and how we define ourselves. Baptism is the symbol of dying to the old and rising to life in Christ, where Christ

is with us. Maybe we should recall that more often, and trace the sign of the cross on our own foreheads, as happens in the Ash Wednesday Liturgy. We are part of this relationship already. But what Jesus calls his followers to do is to look around at the world, and at God's promise of life when we trust in it, and then to bend down and take hold of that cross alongside Jesus, and all his faithful followers down the years. This is what we are free to make a choice about, based on what we see of the world around us and what we hear of the challenge of the gospel as it calls us to live differently. If this way were not costly, it would be of no significance, especially in a world where there are many other easier options on offer. We have to make a choice based on what brings life, most deeply, for ourselves, our communities, our world, the whole of creation.

This cross draws us together in relationship with those we know and those we don't. I found myself thinking about this during the week. It was horrifying to see something of the terrible destruction meted out by the Syrian government war planes on other Syrians not far from Damascus: on hospitals and homes alike. It was horrifying to hear of yet another mass shooting at a school in the USA. The world needs the symbol of the cross, even for those whose faith is different and for whom the cross and the idea of God's son being murdered is ridiculous. The world can see that symbol and know that it is identified with suffering and death and maybe be reminded that it also brings that other word, resurrection. There was no resurrection without the cross. Maybe people don't understand, but it is still powerful. We can't make sense of all these terrible acts of violence that are inescapable even in our homes. We can only bend down and pick up our share of that weight and carry it because we want to affirm that such blackness doesn't have the last word. That is God's promise and we believe that God is faithful. Do we indeed trust that for our own times, for the big things and for the little things of our lives? We stand here, in our time, the inheritors of a story that goes way back to Abraham and even further, that has been claimed and carried down the ages. We can choose not to see, not accept the amazing story of God's grace that is discovered even in our blindness. We can choose to make do with a life that may carry some easy gratification, or we can realise, as we bend down to pick up that cross, that there are many others, some like us and some very different, who are also bending down to pick up theirs. Then we may also see that what we are picking up is not just our own crosses but that somehow, each of these is part of the cross that Jesus accepted and walked towards. He shows us God's faithful relationship remains, and is always being offered to us. We do not walk alone. We can trust in that. And we can trust that God's promise is indeed about relationship that is life-giving, life-affirming and full of hope, for ourselves and for the world we share.