

St Peter's, Mount Park, Ealing

Sunday 1st March 2015

Second Sunday of Lent — Stewardship week 4

Get behind me Satan!

I know they are there. I've read them a hundred times. But when I read or hear Jesus' harsh words I still am left feeling stunned. I just don't expect it of him. He is supposed to be gentle, meek and mild. Jesus is supposed to be the epitome of kindness and generosity. And then he comes out with these harsh words. I just want to say, "Jesus! Behave and apologise. Shocking behaviour". But then of course the Gospel writer is trying to make a point, to offer us some teaching. That is why Jesus turned and looked at or addressed his disciples when he responded to Peter saying, "Get behind me Satan."

There is a realisation in our bible passages today that the will or world of God is nothing like that of human kind. Abram is a hundred years old when God tells him he will be the father of many nations and Sarai is to bear him a son. No wonder Abram laughs (that bit is missed out) when he hears this, wouldn't you? After all who would expect a nonagenarian and his wife to have children! The message here is twofold; the way of God is not the way of people and anything is possible with God.

Here comes our challenge in the life of faith. To understand that we are called to the way of God not the way of the world and yet we live in the world and are influenced by the world. Abram's way is a little easier I suppose, yet he had to adhere to the words of God that to any sane person would make no sense. And God repeats himself. When he comes to Abraham (as he is then) at the Oaks of Mamre in chapter 18 God again promises to make Abraham's descendants as numerous as the stars in the night sky. This time Sarah laughs and is called up by God. God asks, "Why does Sarah laugh?" because what God is saying makes no sense; at least not to us. And yet this covenant made by God with Abraham is fulfilled and Abraham's descendants are numerous.

It seems as God is constantly challenging our perception of the world in which God calls us to live. He calls us to a life of faith and challenges us to actually live it.

In writing to the Christians in Roman Paul is emphasising this change in our relationship with the world. Promises, contracts, understanding of relationships come through the law. A good faithful Pharisee like Paul would have understood that. But this is not the way offered by God through Abraham. In Him and then through Abraham to us as his descendants God is looking for us to understand the world as based upon a spiritual relationship, one born of righteousness and faith in the risen Jesus as the one who proclaims the love of God in the world. This is a whole new relationship for creation to understand. As Paul says, "Abraham believed in the presence of the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist." The challenge is to be in a world that is not of the world.

Peter's reaction is only understandable. He loves Jesus and has followed him all over Galilee and here Jesus is now talking about his own death. Of course Peter will remonstrate with Jesus, wouldn't you? Jesus' exclamation draws into stark relief the

different world view the life of faith must have. It is foolish and idiotic on one level to expect the saviour of the world to die but then that is exactly what Jesus must do. Without his death there is no resurrection. There is now a new covenant, a new relationship with God, made complete in the resurrected Christ who proclaims the depth and height and width and power of God's love for his creation, his people, the ancestors of Abraham and Sarah.

We are expected then to act not as the people of this world but as children of God. We are not expected to remonstrate with Jesus when he tells us he will die for us. We are to celebrate this great sacrifice through which resurrection is offered to all creation.

Ok, this all sounds fine and high and mighty. So what? Well, the question for us is 'how are we living this today?', for our faith is of today and not tomorrow. It is a faith of the here and now; so how does this insight help us here and now? In stewardship we have to think not as people of the world but as children of God. People of the world ask how much do I need to keep back for me; children of God ask how much can I give to God. People of the world place themselves at the centre of their decision making. Peter had put himself, his human values and measures first and expected Jesus to conform to them. He didn't put God at the centre as the children of God are encouraged to do. If Abraham and Sarah had put their needs and desires first would God have made them the ancestors of nations and peoples?

Next week is our Stewardship Sunday, the completion of this year's five week programme. I really hope you are going to be here for this and are prepared to offer to God your pledge for God and God's ministry. Whether you are going to pledge what you have before; whether you are going to make a new pledge; whether you are going to pledge more time, more or different or the same talents, more of less or the same money. Whatever it is, come and pledge and offer to God what you have. Whilst doing that think of Jesus and his reaction to Peter; think of Abram and Sarai and their acceptance of God's covenant and as you think about your pledge pray; pray that your decision with be centred on God and what God is calling you to do; be children of God rather than people of the world and lets serve him and proclaim him Lord in all the world.

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