

## Change and Uncertainty

Lent 2: Genesis 12.1-4a; John 3, 1-17

(Harold Stringer)

Change and uncertainty. It's only too obvious – a real platitude – to say that we live in a time of unprecedented change and confusing uncertainties. Wherever we turn there are huge unanswered questions. From *How bad will the epidemic of coronavirus actually be?* To *What kind of trade deals can Britain on our own hope to negotiate?* And from *What on earth can be done for those desperate refugees fleeing unspeakable horrors in Syria?* To *What is the future of our wonderful planet?* And so on...

Whatever answers or outcomes may emerge for those and many other big questions, it's clear that – even after a hundred years of uniquely rapid change – life for everyone is going to be radically changed yet more. But no one knows how, or how much. Change and uncertainty. What on earth has going to church, and all that implies, got to say about this? Isn't one of the key things about church that it helps us get away from the bewildering torrent of change and the troubling uncertainties of everyday life? Don't we expect it to re-connect us with *unchanging* values and truths?

Well of course that is part of its value – to put in a larger perspective all the troubles and horrors we see, far and near; to look above the 'changes and chances of this fleeting world' – to get off the runaway train and listen to the silence. But that's not the whole story.

We are now well into Lent – not the most comforting season of the church year, but deliberately the most challenging. It's a time to encourage us to some renewed effort at self-discipline, but much more. It's a season for reappraisal of our personal life, our spiritual growth, a new look at where we are and where we are going. A time for discerning where we might be in need of some repentance. Repentance is not to be confused with penitence, which is about regret and sorrow for what we've done wrong or failed to do right. There's a place for that, of course, but *repentance*, in New Testament terms, means a deep change of mind and heart, change in our inner being. This does not necessarily mean some instant, total change, a conversion experience. On the contrary, a step by step process, a gradual dawning of some new light, is likely to be more lasting. This change within ourselves, fast or slow, is a lifetime's work, at the very foundation of the Gospel message: Jesus comes into Galilee and proclaims 'The kingdom of God has come near: repent, and believe in the good news.' It is *good* news, yet quite unsettling.

Change and uncertainty. In our first reading today, Abram (not yet given his new name) Abram's family had already uprooted themselves from their original home in Ur of the Chaldeans (near the mouth of the river Euphrates) and travelled a long way north-west and settled down in Haran – evidently for some years. While there, both his brother and his father died, and it's clear Abram became leader of the whole clan, which had prospered there. 'All the possessions they had gathered and the persons they had acquired', probably the herdsmen mentioned later, for the large flocks of sheep and goats of Abram himself and his nephew Lot. They've been doing very nicely at Haran.

Then God steps in and breaks up the party. 'The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and will bless you" ... so Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him.' How could he be so sure that this was God's will and promise? How would he know when he got to the chosen place? As the NT letter to Hebrews put it: 'By faith Abram obeyed ... and he set out, not knowing where he was going.' Change and uncertainty. But it led to an unimaginably great outcome.

In the Gospel reading we hear of a Pharisee named Nicodemus. He'd clearly been impressed by Jesus, but also puzzled and, what's more, afraid of what the others would say if they knew he, a leading Pharisee, was secretly visiting Jesus. His whole religion was built on cut and dried certainties, the 613 commands of the Torah. Rabbis might argue over the exact application, but the commands themselves were beyond question. Talk of being re-born of water and the Spirit, and the Spirit likened to the wind – invisible, unpredictable, un-graspable – was totally at odds with a religion based on 'thou shalt/thou shalt not.' 'How can these things be?' asked Nicodemus in bewilderment, far from ready to become a Disciple. But he does appear once more in the Gospel story, defending Jesus against other Pharisees who wanted to have Jesus arrested; and then getting derided himself. Change and uncertainty.

What I'm trying to say is that change, and uncertainty, are inseparable from our faith, and essential to our growth. Faith does not mean blind credulity. It does mean learning where we can put our trust. Not in money or possessions, nor even our homes. Trust in some people – yes; but carefully selected, and not to be loaded with too much! Of course it is in God alone that we can rely totally. It takes humility and *perseverance* (don't I know it!) to be aware of God's guiding presence. God graciously respects our own particular path, but it helps to know there are others struggling along too. 'Through the night of doubt and sorrow onward goes the pilgrim band' as the hymn puts it. As every pilgrim knows, it is the journey, with all its troubles and pains and uncertainties, as well as its joys, that makes for real change, more than the arriving. We can't get rid of change and uncertainty; they are essential to our growth. I'm reminded of J H Newman's touching verse:

Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom.  
Lead thou me on;  
The night is dark, and I am far from home,  
Lead thou me on.  
Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see  
The distant scene; one step enough for me.