

Lent 2/Mk 8.31 Covenant Love & What can you give in return for your life?

Today our Gospel passage has the profound question from Jesus, 'Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?' It's the hardest question of the text, I think, that challenges us on this second Sunday of Lent, to consider, what can I give in return for my life?

In order to understand it, we need to look back. Only then can we look at the now, and so begin to look forwards.

As we look back we consider the OT readings that have paved our journey so far. Today, we have the Covenant with Abraham and Sarah - and don't forget that Abraham was only 1yr younger than Captain Tom when this adventure began! It's a beautiful passage about our beautiful faith - and our faith is beautiful, because it is true.

I want to return to Sarah and Abraham shortly, in order to consider our Gospel passage. But first, let's cast a quick glance around to the symphonic resonance we find in other key texts we've been hearing to prepare us for today. Last Sunday we heard the reading about Noah in Genesis 9.9 and the establishing of a Covenant between God and the descendants of Noah, as it says in vv12f *'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.'* How incredible that the sign of the Rainbow was chosen at the start of Covid to represent hope, and the faithfulness of our key workers!

And this earlier Genesis reading, followed on from the Reading we had on 11 February at the Thursday Eucharist from Genesis 2 and the account of the forming of humanity in Adam and Eve, and what is known as the Covenant of Creation - the first divine covenant of Scripture. Interestingly, theologians also sometimes call this the

Covenant of Work, because it isn't a gift of grace - rather Adam must work to achieve it.

What I think we see from this pattern is that we have a God of tenderness who keeps shifting the goal posts to reveal mercy and kindness and to keep in relationship with the creation which continuously fails and falls short.

So let's look again at Sarah and Abraham.

At the beginning of the story they are names Sarai and Abram. To us this may seem almost irrelevant. But if we look across the witness of Scripture, again and again important things are signified by giving a new name. As Isaiah put it 'I will give them...a name better than that of sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off.' (56.5) and again 'You will be called by a new names that the mouth of the Lord will bestow' (62.2), or as Revelation 2.17 puts it 'I will give to each one a white stone, and on the stone will be engraved a name'.

So what happens here with the renaming of Sarai and Abram? Well, Sarai means something like 'Princess'. And she is renamed Sarah, which still means 'Princess,' but also 'Mother of nations' and some scholars think the '-ah' of Yahweh is significant. And Abram means 'exalted Father', who becomes Abraham, meaning 'Father of a multitude'. Sarah was also called 'Iscah' because of her beauty; and she was seen as superior to Abraham in the gift of prophecy, with God also speaking directly to her.

The backdrop of our Gospel then is the story of God's faithful covenant love. God is always a God of mercy and kindness, who reaches out so that we can touch love even through our human frailty.

So now, as we turn to our Gospel story, we see the backdrop is the God of tenderness reaching out with faithful covenant love, revealed in Sarah and Abraham, the mother and father of nations.

One of the key distinctions of our gospel is that our minds are set on 'human things', whereas Jesus' is set on 'the glory of God and the holy angels'.

The challenge is how do we shift our focus? What is the divine equivalent of Spec Savers? That's what Lent is about. It doesn't matter if you eat a little less chocolate, or drink less alcohol. It doesn't matter if you read the whole bible and the works of Augustine, Barth and Mary Daly. And it's not about success. Rather it is about shifting our focus — maybe even changing our spiritual name, to draw us closer to the God of tenderness.

Mark get's this. His gospel is sometimes named the passion gospel, because half of it is focused on the passion narrative. Here we are in Chapter 8 (his gospel has 16 chapters). And so we are half way through and suddenly we are hit with what is to come.

Instead of self preservation, Jesus invites us to shift our attention, and to embrace the cross.

Now so often people interpret this as a painful difficult thing. And, of course, sometimes life is. But I think we need to look harder at this as we shift our focus.

The God of the Covenant is always the God of mercy and kindness, who reaches out so that we can touch love even through our human frailty.

So let's look at the setting of our passage. Chapter 8 begins with the feeding of the 4000. Some of you may know that Matthew and Mark both have 2 feeding miracles - first the feeding of the 5000, then the feeding of the 4000.

The feeding of the 5000 occurs in Jewish territory. Then the feeding of the 4000 occurs in Gentile territory. The 5000 has 5 loaves, and feeds 5

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thousand, reminiscent of the 5 books of the Jewish law, and 12 baskets are left over.

The feedings of the 4000 takes place in the region of the Gerasenes, in the region around Decapolis. Here 7 loaves are used and 7 baskets are collected. Seven being the number of completeness and points us back to the 7 days of creation. Clearly we only become complete when Jew and Gentile (- or any other distinction -) become united.

Following this story there is a demand for a sign before a warning that we need both the pieces left by the Jewish feeding and the Gentile feeding to be complete. Then there's a twofold healing of blindness - again perhaps representing the 2 traditions, Jewish and Gentile.

Only then do we get the foretelling of great suffering, death and resurrection. Peter - the petulant loveable retriever puppy disciple - objects. And we get the warning 'get behind me Satan' (remember the Temptations of last Sunday?).

Then we see Jesus say the words, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me... Indeed what can they give in return for their life?'

As I say, this is often seen as a battle cry for embracing suffering and hardship. But if we look a little deeper, with our eyes on the the Covenant God who is always a God of mercy and kindness, who reaches out so that we can touch love even through our human frailty, we'll see something different and our focus will change. To interpret this, I think we have to look to at two verses from Matthew's Gospel in chapter 11(29-30): 'Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

Or as it says in the book of Sirach, 'I open my mouth and speak of her: gain wisdom for yourselves at no cost. Take her yoke upon your neck; that your mind may receive her teaching. For she is close to those who

seek her, and the one who is in earnest finds her. See for yourselves! I have labored only a little but have found much.' Sirach 51:25-27

I think that sometimes we think the bearing of this cross is heavy. But think again. When two ox were harnessed to a yoke it was often an inexperienced one who was yoked along side an experienced beast who did the hard work.

This reading, to my mind is about the Covenant God who is always a God of mercy and kindness, who reaches out so that we can touch love even through our human frailty. Wearing God's yoke is easy and light, because God in Christ bears the brunt of it. The word sin has its origins in the Greek from an arrow that falls short of the target. We - like God's people through all history - will fall short of the target. And yet what we still see is the Covenant God of tenderness reaching out again, and again and again.

What can I give in return for my life? Well you can't - other than your life hidden with Christ in God. For this Lent, each of us is invited to take up our Cross. Not in some terrible, oppressive way that will crush us. But rather in the life giving way of attaching ourself to the God of mercy. As Julian of Norwich puts it, we are '*to choose Jesus for my heaven*', to yoke ourselves to Jesus, in '*welc and in woe*'. By doing so we will journey with Jesus to see suffering and death pulverised, and bask forever in the radiance of Christ's gentleness revealing mercy and kindness. All we can give in return for our life, is to respond in love to God's love. And to yoke ourselves to Christ as we take up our Cross. Unlike Christ's, our Cross isn't crushing. Rather the Covenant God of tenderness chooses a Cross for us that which leads us to the fulness of life - in this world and the next.

As Paul writes in Romans:

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.