

The Second Sunday in Lent.

Genesis 17 v 1-7, 15-16. Romans 4 v 13-end. Mark 8 v 31-end.

How often in our prayer life have we prayed for faith? So often we call out to the Lord for enough faith to believe that something will happen or not happen as the case may be. It could be for healing for ourselves or another or just for a deeper belief in God. We often think of our faith as weak or poor, and sadly, there are times we may have been wrongly told that it is because of our poor faith that our prayers are not being answered. Yet when we look at Abram/Abraham, this man who is held up as the father of nations, we see a man whose faith is very much like ours. The promises of God seemed impossible even unbelievable to Abraham, as we see when God tells him that Sarai will have a child in her very old age (v17). Abram falls on his knees and laughs. Yet we all know in time, nations did come out of Abram's line. This was not only the Jewish nation, but also the Samaritan nation through Hagar the slave girl (chapt 16) that came into being. The Palestinian people still see Abraham as the father of their nation. Ultimately of course, this is where we find ourselves as Christians, who are a branch of the Jewish faith.

Faith and prayer go hand in hand and both are the business of God. Faith is given to us through the grace of God, it is God's gift to us. The meaning of the word grace means undeserved favour. The forgiveness and the gifts of God come to us not because we have earned them, or we have gained brownie points with God, but because God desires to give them to us. So it is with prayer. Often prayer is answered in the way we least expect or at the time we least expect. It can also take time for the answer to be revealed. Perhaps we have to learn a few insights before our prayer is answered. Just because it is not answered in the way we want, it does not mean God has forgotten us, or forsaken us. Mother Julian often talked about God's wisdom, so it is in God's wisdom when he chooses to reveal it. As in Romans 8 v 28, "We know all things work for the good for those who love God".

In the gospel reading, Peter could not cope with the truth. He did not want to face the inevitable, that this man who he had grown to love and respect, would have his life cut short by a cruel death. How often do we feel like Peter? We want things not to happen but they inevitably will. Or we are waiting for an end, but the end does not feel any nearer. Just like now. How we want to see an end to this covid crisis, so that we can go and freely meet people, for us not to be alone. We want to see the loved ones that we have not seen for a very long time. To share burdens, to laugh and cry. Then there is also the simple fact of living without fear of catching the virus and becoming ill or infecting others. Yet we must wait and be patient and that is hard. A saying that all too readily comes off people's lips, particularly on the television, is "I can't wait". This is not used in the meaning "I have no time to wait" but I can't wait in the sense I am in a hurry for the outcome. It cannot come too soon. Yet in truth, we all know we will have to wait, and wait it through whatever it is. We have to wait for the right time. As the old saying goes, "A watched pot never boils". I think that can be truly difficult and perhaps when Jesus is talking about his followers denying themselves and following him is about just that.

It is sometimes just the hard task of walking with our Lord and Saviour through whatever difficult situations come to us. Jesus never said it would be easy, for in the next breath he speaks about taking up their cross and following him. But in doing so, we find life in abundance. When I read these verses I often think of Howard Hughes, a man who had everything yet had nothing. He was so fearful of getting ill and old, he locked himself away and lived a lonely sad existence. When one reads of the Celtic saints, they lived on the edges

of the country, on the coastal places. They went in small boats to reach unknown communities to spread the gospel. My son said to me once, "Mum, if you don't live on the edge you are taking up too much room." Yet it is hard to live on the edge, in the uncomfortable places where we do not know the future or what is to become of us.

When I read the Gospel reading, it immediately made me think of how we accept facing our own death or indeed that of someone else who is very dear to us. A little bit late in life I did an MA on Pastoral Theology. As part of the course work, I had to write an essay on death and bereavement. My tutor had one criticism, that there was nothing personal in it about the bereavements in my own life. I said, "That is because I have never suffered one." A few months later, my husband died very suddenly. What was academic became very real. The only thing I could do was walk with God, but I knew I had to live. It is in those times when one sees and experiences the value of a Simon of Cyrene to help us carry our crosses.

We are all going through a tough time, some tougher than others. We can only see it through by faith, prayer and helping one another along the way. Jesus needed his friends. That is why I think he was disappointed in Peter, because he was listening but did not understand what Jesus was saying. With people standing with us, we can support each other by faith and in faith and by listening and trusting in the word of God. "Who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification." The God who did that for us will not leave us comfortless.

God bless you all and keep safe.
Angela