

## **Sunday 16th March 2025 The Second Sunday of Lent**

### **Genesis 15.1-12,17-18**

The word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.' But Abram said, 'O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abram said, 'You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.' But the word of the LORD came to him, 'This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.' He brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Then he said to him, 'I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.' But he said, 'O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?' He said to him, 'Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon.' He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.'

### **GOSPEL READING: Luke 13.31-35**

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.' He said to them, 'Go and tell that fox for me, "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem." Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."'

Have you ever woken up in the night in a panic and thought: oh, thank goodness, it was just a dream?!

Dreams and visions feature quite strongly in the Bible. If they appear, they never seem to be 'just' a dream. (Examples).

In the Bible, dreams seem to have real physical connections and outcomes. The ancient Jews, and indeed the early Christians understood the nature of humanity in a very holistic way. All the different aspects of being human were thought of as one. So spirituality, emotions, thoughts, and physical bodies were all part of the whole being. There was no disconnect between body and soul.

From our perspective, the story of Abram and his covenant with God that we've just read seems really weird. But to the ancient Hebrews, dreams were important, and they were part of the reality of being human, just as physical bodies and spirituality were. Dreams were deeply connected with physical and spiritual reality.

So let's look at this story from that perspective.

Abram has real doubts about what God has promised. God tells him to sacrifice some animals. A spiritual conversation with God resulting in a very real, quite gory physical event. And there is even a physical detail described where Abram chases the birds of prey away. All of these physical actions are part of his interaction with God. Then we have Abram descending into deep dark sleep, and God (showing up in the traditional smoke and fire!) makes a covenant with Abram.

And Abram wakes up and says, oh, thank goodness it was all just a dream!

No of course he doesn't!

He's still got a way to go before he sees the physical result of God's promise, but it's real now. He believes it.

If we begin to think of our spiritual and physical lives simply being our lives, a lot changes. We can't put physical and spiritual in separate boxes any more.

It actually helps us to grasp the significance of the season of Lent.

There's a physical part of it that goes hand in hand with the spiritual. Why would there not be?

For years, we went as a family to a big Christian event called New Wine. There were loads of people camping on a showground. There were great speakers (and some not so great!) There was fantastic inspiring worship. It was a place for encountering the Holy Spirit; genuinely experiencing the presence of God. And I felt it; it was real. But a few weeks later, real life kicked in again, and I lost that sense of God's presence. It happened every year. I'd come back all inspired and try to hang on to that feeling, that sense of God being really truly present, and it just vanished.

Now I look back and think maybe I was looking for God only in one place. The spiritually charged place. And I think maybe God shows up in other places too. In everyday life. In my physical normal life. What I wanted was all the fun stuff, all the joy and excitement. The spiritual experiences. What I

perhaps wasn't as keen on was the everyday nitty gritty of following Jesus. I don't think I even had any idea what that might mean.

In our Gospel reading we find Jesus beginning the long journey to Jerusalem. He's headed towards a place of suffering. Jerusalem was a place of deep pain. It had known war, starvation, sieges, invasion, complete destruction, and the exile of its people. It was murder central, especially when it came to prophets speaking out. It had known good kings and bad kings, probably more bad than good. And there were still hurting people in that city, longing for freedom, longing for a saviour to deliver them from the current Roman occupation. And Jesus, like a mother hen with her chicks, longs to protect and nurture and gather the suffering to himself.

God gravitates towards places of suffering. Jesus gravitates towards a place where people are experiencing deep pain, knowing that it won't end well for him. And I think, looking back, I wish I'd understood that better. I think to experience God in our real lives, we need to gravitate towards those who are in pain. Love is real, and people need to see what love looks like.

A week or two ago I went to our Deanery Synod. (Don't switch off! I promise not to bore you!) A young man, new to the Deanery, called Father Lee, spoke about mission in his tradition, which is anglo catholic like ours. He said something I've never heard before. He said "All mission flows from the altar". People come to the altar, to the place of encounter

with God, and go out to our hurting world to bring God's presence. That's his understanding. And he pointed out that historically, it was anglo catholic parishes that worked in the poorest parts of the country and brought hope. I like that. I like that a spiritual encounter is expected to have a physical outcome. And it's good. Coming to this altar isn't meant to be just a cosy personal experience with God, and if we treat it like that we will lose that sense of God's presence. God is out there where the pain is.

As most of you know, during Lent we don't use the word alleluia. Except I just did! We put it away until Easter when it comes back with a bang! Why do we do this? In my mind, it's to do with standing in solidarity with those who find it really difficult to worship God or experience God's presence. They can't give voice to an alleluia.

Let me talk for a moment to those of you who are suffering, right now, in all kinds of ways. God heads towards you. He doesn't turn his back on you. He has the same compassion for you that Jesus had for the city of Jerusalem. God is very present with those who suffer. You may not feel it. You may not feel very spiritual at all. God may seem very distant. But it's true. And it's the work of the whole church family to be alongside you and care, even if we're not always very good at it, and even if we can't make everything be ok. We lock the alleluias away to stand with you.

Sometimes I think we're a bit scared to go where the suffering is. We're scared we will be out of our depth. And we are really scared that we won't be able to fix people; we

won't have answers for their pain. Jesus didn't fix Jerusalem. There was no divine intervention in the suffering of the people. But he still went there. And I think to be physically present with another person, especially if they are suffering, is really important. Not just for them, but for all of us, because that's where we find God.

### **Pope Francis reflecting from hospital:**

"The walls of hospitals have heard more honest prayers than churches...

They have witnessed far more sincere kisses than those in airports...

It is in hospitals that you see a homophobe being saved by a gay doctor.

A privileged doctor saving the life of a beggar...

In intensive care, you see a Jew taking care of a racist...

A police officer and a prisoner in the same room receiving the same care...

A wealthy patient waiting for a liver transplant, ready to receive the organ from a poor donor...

It is in these moments, when the hospital touches the wounds of people, that different worlds intersect according to a divine design. And in this communion of destinies, we realize that alone, we are nothing.

The absolute truth of people, most of the time, only reveals itself in moments of pain or in the real threat of an irreversible loss.

A hospital is a place where human beings remove their masks and show themselves as they truly are, in their purest essence.

This life will pass quickly, so do not waste it fighting with people.

Do not criticize your body too much.

Do not complain excessively.

Do not lose sleep over bills.

Make sure to hug your loved ones.

Do not worry too much about keeping the house spotless.

Material goods must be earned by each person—do not dedicate yourself to accumulating an inheritance.

You are waiting for too much: Christmas, Friday, next year, when you have money, when love arrives, when everything is perfect...

Listen, perfection does not exist.

A human being cannot attain it because we are simply not made to be fulfilled here.

Here, we are given an opportunity to learn.

So, make the most of this trial of life—and do it now.

Respect yourself, respect others. Walk your own path, and let go of the path others have chosen for you.

Respect: do not comment, do not judge, do not interfere.

Love more, forgive more, embrace more, live more intensely!

And leave the rest in the hands of the Creator."