



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Second Sunday of Lent

Romans 4. 13.25

Mark 8.31-38

I wrote last time of 'Mary Berry's Easter Feast' a series of two TV programmes about various dishes prepared by Christian denominations over Lent, Holy Week and Easter. I always watch them again around this time. My cousin lives in Athens and the Greek Orthodox tradition is the 'Lenten fast' which means food throughout Lent must be vegan. On Easter Sunday rich food is prepared and brought to the Easter feast. In one of the programmes Mary bakes a Simnel cake and has tea with the Archbishop of Canterbury, (as you do!) and in another goes to lunch with the then Archbishop of York John Sentamu. He is making a lamb roast to one of Mary's own recipes which he has altered slightly. He wears an apron bearing the legend, 'Have faith in my cooking.'

We unlike the disciples have not seen Jesus or walked alongside him. Most of us have not had a 'Damascus Road' experience like Paul. But Jesus has something to say about that. John 20.29

Jesus has appeared to his disciples on the eve of his resurrection and Thomas is not with them. He refuses to believe until he sees with his own eyes. A week later Jesus appears once more and Thomas is present and seeing Jesus says, 'My Lord and my God.'

²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.'

We have not seen Jesus, those early Christians had not seen Jesus or have any of his followers down the ages but we believe because we have faith. What is faith? Another way of expressing it would be to trust. (Just as the Archbishop was saying trust my cooking!) We have, as it says at the end of the quotation from John, the scriptures and the Gospels, they should be our guide and the foundation of our faith, our trust in Jesus Christ as part of the trinity.

The theme last week was baptism, the theme this week is faith in God, trust in our Lord Jesus Christ. It would be helpful to read the Old Testament lesson set for today, Genesis 17.1-7 & 15-16 because it tells the story of Abraham that Paul is referring to in the reading from Romans.

One thing that links this week's readings to last week's is the word covenant, or promise. God made covenants with his people, last week God's covenant was given in the story of Noah, Genesis 9. 16. It was of course never again to destroy the earth by water. The symbol of this was to be the rainbow.

⁶'When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.' ¹⁷God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'

The Old Testament reading begins with the covenant God made with Abraham,

'Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations.'

The central theme is faith; it is so throughout the Old and New Testament. God makes his covenants with the people of Israel he never breaks them though the people do often. There were several covenants between God and his people, with Moses, the priestly covenant with Aaron and the Davidic covenant which we looked at in an earlier Reflection.

The final covenant, the final reconciliation is brought about through Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 11.

²³'For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

The new covenant is for all humanity not just the people of Israel. All this may seem like preamble but it is fundamental to our readings.

Paul's point in the reading from Romans is that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, in other words to save all of humanity.

I think of the film 'Whistle down the wind' when three children think they have Jesus in their barn. As they are going up the road towards their farm they turn round to see a crowd of other children following. To the question, 'What do you lot want?' Comes the answer, 'We have come to see Jesus; he's not your private property.'

This is the theme of the Romans Reading. Yes the Jews, the Israelites were used to thinking of themselves as God's chosen people, yes Jesus did come firstly to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' but the vast majority of them rejected him. Quite apart from that Jesus is for all people for all the earth. He is the creator, he is part of the Godhead and all creation, and all humanity is his own. Jesus came to everyone, to begin the process of new creation which was God's plan from the beginning of time.

The reading from Romans looks back to God's covenant with Abraham. The promise was that God would make him the 'father of many nations.' Well it took a great deal of faith for Abraham to trust

in God's word. His wife was barren; he was, we are told, ninety nine. Children were out of the question as far as he was concerned but God had other plans. We think too of other people like Hannah who had not conceived but then prayed to God and gave birth to Samuel, of Elizabeth and John the Baptist these children were literally gifts of God. So too with Sarah she will be the mother of many nations.

¹⁵God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

At the beginning of our reading Paul is making the point that people are not saved by keeping strictly to the Jewish law. Paul of course calls himself, 'the apostle to the gentiles.' He founded churches which consisted of Jews but also of many other nationalities. People who had joined the Christian churches leaving former religions, worship and beliefs behind.

Paul has prior to this passage been talking about circumcision. Salvation he says is not dependent on strict adherence to the Jewish law but on faith. Abraham received the promises of God through faith; the law had not been given yet!

¹³ 'For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.'

The law shows sin for what it is and it deals with it. It is a code for behaviour but it is not about salvation. Salvation comes through faith in God. For Abraham it meant living in God's way when all about were abandoning him; it meant total trust in God and obedience to him. The same is true of us. We don't behave properly because we get caught and punished by the law if we don't! We follow the code of behaviour Jesus Christ gave and the code of behaviour he expects from us. We do what is right in God's eyes.

Look at that covenant once again, 'I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations.' Here it is quite clear salvation is not just for a small nation located in the Holy Land, no salvation is for 'many nations.'

God is the God of the gentiles too; Jesus Christ comes to win salvation for all people. Look at what Simeon says, 'my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel' Luke 2.30. Salvation is inclusive, it is for all who believe and trust in Jesus.

Think of the visitors to the Christ child at the nativity, Jews and gentiles. This point is made clearly in Rembrandt's 'Adoration of the magi.' It hangs in the chapel of King's College Cambridge. You see it each Christmas in the programme, Carols from Kings. I was watching a programme about it the other day and it was pointed out that the magi, gentiles, are depicted as representatives of three continents, Africa, Europe and Asia.

Abraham is then the 'father of us all' and we all share in salvation through faith in Jesus Christ who died for us and who rose from the dead and won salvation for us.

Paul makes this point at verse 23 at the end of the reading.

²³Now the words, 'it was reckoned to him', were written not for his sake alone, ²⁴but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, ²⁵who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.'

Those who believe in Jesus are part of his covenant family as we have seen in the quotations from 1 Corinthians 11 above. They share in the promises of God and in salvation and eternal life that Jesus won for us.

But to follow Jesus is not easy. Mark makes that quite clear. This is the famous passage in which Peter has spoken for the disciples and has said, 'You are the Messiah.' In a flash of insight and faith Peter makes his declaration. Usually we have this part of the passage and then our reading carries on after it. But not today, our reading begins at Mark. 8.31.

³¹'Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.'

This is not what the disciple would have expected Jesus to say. They lived in violent times under an oppressive and sometimes brutal occupying force. They must have been used to life being nasty, brutish and short particularly if you did not toe the Roman line. To follow Jesus would have been dangerous - look what happened to John the Baptist. What Jesus says here is different. It isn't just a matter of him falling foul of the authorities be they Jewish or Roman, Jesus is speaking not just as if he knows it will happen but as if it is preordained. Of course that is exactly what it is.

'He was obedient to death, even death on a cross,' it was only by walking the road to Calvary that Jesus could bear the sins of humanity and vanquish sin and death once and for all.

That is not what the disciples want to hear, firstly they do not want their Messiah to die and secondly Peter loves his master so Peter does what anyone would.

'And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Peter is only acting according to what comes naturally, of course he is. But to 'act naturally' is not always the way of obedience or faith.

Jesus makes it quite clear what the cost of discipleship will be because he calls the crowds to him. This is not personal to Peter anymore or even to the disciples, this message is for anyone who wants to follow Jesus.

³⁴'He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'

Jesus is saying if you want to be my disciples (and I mean this in its widest sense,) it is not about following natural instincts it is about following me. This means replacing natural instincts with faith in Jesus and trusting implicitly in him whatever the cost.

The natural instinct of anyone facing persecution would be to run and fast. Jesus knew the cost of following God to the bitter end. What Jesus warns his would-be followers of here he is to experience himself as he has explained to the disciples.

He too experiences his 'agony in the garden,' he too asks that the cup pass from him, but he is obedient. 'Not my will but yours be done.'

What will happen to Jesus is not what Peter or the disciples want for the Messiah. What will happen to his followers will be persecution and even death. The natural thing to do would be to run, to stop being Christian but it is Jesus we follow not our natural will. To broaden it out and to link it to last week it is not what we want but it is what Jesus wants. Indeed as we say daily in our Lord's Prayer, 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'

There is a huge "**but**" though, but it is only by walking this way of obedience and death that Jesus can bring about new life for all. He will begin God's new creation at his resurrection. It is the only way for his followers too.

³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? '

Not many of us will run the risk of persecution or death for Jesus though in other countries and under other regimes this is a daily occurrence. However 'Lose their life' doesn't have to be literal. The Celtic Christians recognised different types of martyrdom. One was giving everything up for God. That again for us doesn't mean turning our backs on life it means embracing the way of Christ wholeheartedly. To 'Do to death' the selfishness, arrogance, jealousy and petty sins of which we are all guilty; to fix our eyes on Jesus and his teaching.

What better time to take stock of our lives than at Lent? What better time to choose a gospel and read it through to really focus on Jesus' teaching?

Maybe that is a question for each one of us this Lent, am I doing Jesus' will or my own? What would Jesus think of what I have just done?

If that question was asked by Christians of every action and obeyed we really would be Christ's followers here on earth and this world would be transformed.

'Past put behind us, for the future take us. Lord of our lives to live for Christ alone.' Timothy Dudley-Smith

~~~~~