

Second Sunday of Lent: February 28th 2010

Genesis 15:5-18; Luke 9:28-36

Notes: Genesis 15:5-18

- There were more than likely in Israel's history a collection of texts on how the people came to be living in the land of Canaan. In today's reading we see two of the themes of the land and the descendants of Abraham being brought together: Abraham's descendants will multiply and they will inherit the land.
- Scholars tell us that both strands of the stories emerged in the present form at a time when it seemed that their possession of the land was under threat and from a time when the people were questioning whether or not they would be able to survive as a people, as a nation. By having these promises written into the story of Abraham they are able to offer reassurances that God had made these covenant promises and that they would therefore survive their present ordeal.

Our reading today begins with an invitation by God: *Look up to heaven and count the stars if you can.* Abraham was brooding because he had no heir, no son and so he was beginning to doubt whether or not the promises of God could be achieved. What God did was to direct Abraham's eyes away from the human, away from the earthly, away from a concentration on the problem at hand. He directs Abraham's eyes to the magnificence of the creative powers of the God who called him. That is an essential starting point for Abraham if he is to be a faithful servant of God. He has to learn to lift his eyes from the earth and keep them focussed on the heavenly realm, for his salvation is not going to come from his own abilities and fertility but from the hand of God. And when we think that this was written as a message of hope for the nation that was beginning to doubt its ability to survive the political situation and the wars that were threatening its very existence, the message is one of great hope: keep your eyes firmly fixed on God, for then everything else will fall into place. In other words, he is telling Israel: look around you. The nation has grown and prospered but it began as a single man and his family. The blessings and promises of God worked in the time of Abraham and there is no reason why they will not work today in our own time. But the future has to be about God and not about Israel.

It is verse 6 that picks up this point so well and which sits at the heart of the reading: *Abram put his faith in Yahweh who counted this as making him justified.* It is this response that leads to later generations of Hebrews and later again the Church community calling Abraham "our Father in Faith". We saw earlier on in the story, Abraham lamenting the fact that he had no son and heir and that another man's child would be his heir. Now, after being challenged by God, Abraham repents and places himself under the rule of Yahweh. This is what makes Abraham a righteous man – the God that is within him takes him over and shapes him according to what he wants Abraham to be, and Abraham allows God to do this, trusting that by so living, the will of God will come about. Again, think about how important this message is to a people who are being threatened by destruction at the hands of the Babylonians and Assyrians. How are they to respond? Do they trust in God or do they set about avoiding destruction through their own efforts and strengths? God has made this promise to Abraham; there will always be a people of the Covenant. Do you trust your God or your own human intuition?

In the next section the reading takes us through the promise of the land. It begins with a simple affirmation: *“I am Yahweh” he said to him “who brought you out of the land of Ur of the Chaldeans to make you heir to this land”*. In the context of our story, there are two very important affirmations here. The first is that we are dealing with Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews. We know that this is the name of the God who called Moses and who led the people out of slavery in Egypt into freedom in the promised land. He is an all-powerful God, a God of the covenant, a God of history and a God whose power and might no person could query or question. This is the God who is speaking and so Abraham (and the people in Israel in the seventh century for whom this was written) can have absolute trust and faith in what is promised. The land will be Abraham’s and his heir’s – because God said it would belong to them. Nothing more is needed except to get on with living their lives in the belief that this was happening as they speak.

The second significant thing that we can see in this reading is that the call of Abraham was for a purpose. God called Abraham so that he could inherit the land. And we know from the account of the call in chapter 12 of the book of Genesis that the land was not an end in itself. The land was a step towards achieving a much greater goal: leading the nations of the world to know God.

We then have an odd section where the promises of God are solemnized in what seems to be a rather bizarre ritual. Throughout it though, we have some significant messages of hope and guarantees about the nature of God’s involvement with his people. We are presented with a God who is Lord of history. He makes a prophecy about Abraham’s descendents going into slavery in Egypt and then coming back to take possession of the land of Canaan. We are told that Abraham will die before all of these things happen and that God will punish and destroy the people of the land of Canaan, particularly the Amorites their traditional enemy. This is all reassuring the people that God is Lord of history and that he is not some kind of remote God, sitting in heaven allowing his people to be powerless victims of the world around them. He is with them in the midst of their sufferings and as this prophecy shows, he understood what was coming and reassures them that there is life beyond their sufferings. That life is guaranteed because they are a called people and a people to whom a promise has been made.

The great challenge for Abraham (Israel) is to believe this. The great temptation that they faced was that of unbelief. They were tempted to believe: *yes we believe in God but we do not think he has the interest needed to be with us to steer us through our present difficulty!* So the editors of today’s text are showing the people of their time that the promises God made to Abraham all came true. If God can do that in history they should rest assured that he will do it in their day – but they have to trust in him and live according to his ways. That is never easy, particularly when the challenges to faith appear to be so enormous.

Notes: Luke 9:28-36

- In Mark this story is to be found in a different context. For that evangelist the disciples are shown as being unable to comprehend the mission and message of Jesus. It is all too much for them. Here Luke is more interested in linking the transfiguration with the call of the twelve, their sending out on their

mission and the multiplication of the loaves. It fits in with his presentation of the twelve as the New Israel.

- It is essential for three stories to be read together: Peter's confession of Jesus as the messiah; the first prediction of the passion and the transfiguration.
- Peter calls Jesus the Messiah (9:20), God's anointed one. It is a title pretty much avoided in the Gospel, though common in the Acts. It is only after the resurrection that it is found on the lips of Jesus.
- There are three predictions of the passion (9:22ff; 9:43-45; 18:31-34). Jesus is rejected by the elders, high priests and the scribes, the group which makes up the Sanhedrin which is really the supreme court of Israel. It sat in Jerusalem and ruled over the religious life of the nation. It is this group which opposes Jesus and which is shown as putting Jesus to death.
- In the passion prediction Luke adds the demand that what happened to Jesus must also happen to the disciples. What the enemies of Jesus did to him, the disciples must willingly take on themselves.
- The way of the Lord is the way of the disciple and their only way to glory is through the ignominy of the cross. Death before life.
- The transfiguration on Luke is presented as a prayer experience. Jesus goes up into the hills to pray. It is while at prayer that he is changed, becoming dazzling white (like the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7:9).
- Moses and Elijah appear. Moses is important for Luke and the links between the ministry of Moses and that of Jesus shapes the story in Luke-Acts. Elijah reminds the reader of the promise of Deut 18:15-18 and 34:10 where it is promised that a "prophet like Moses would be raised up. Both Moses and Elijah had experiences of God's presence on the holy mountain.
- The three tents point us to the feast of Booths (Deut 16:13), a harvest festival which was one of the three pilgrimage feasts to Jerusalem.

The Jesus we find in Luke is very aware of the growing levels of resistance towards him and his ministry and the evangelist is showing us a Jesus who is aware of what is going on in the hearts and minds of people and as a prophet who knows what is about to happen. This prophetic nature of Jesus' ministry will be borne out at the crucifixion. He predicted it and it happened. He also predicted the resurrection so they should not be so disheartened when the crucifixion takes place for they know also that there will be a resurrection three days later. What Jesus says can be trusted!

Luke addresses the prediction of the passion to "all" and not just to the disciples, making the cross and suffering an unavoidable part of all discipleship and ministry. If anyone at all wants to follow Jesus, they must be prepared to have that following shaped by the cross and that it means. What he has in mind is not just the crucifixion, that a disciple might have to actually die as a consequence of their faith in him. The tense used in Greek makes it clear that the cross is an ongoing part of what discipleship means, that there is not a single event in the life of the disciple, not a single moment in their existence where the cross does not play a defining role in how they are to live and how they are to respond. He makes this clear when he says the cross must be taken up "daily". He is talking about the cornerstone of all Christian spirituality.

It is into this context that all of the evangelists place the transfiguration. There are a number of points in the account that can assist us with our reflections this lent. All

accounts have Peter responding to the transfiguration. He wants to build three tents there. This is a great temptation for religion. He wants to capture Jesus, to lock him away, to order him and locate him in some kind of routine and ritual. But Jesus cannot be so captured. The contrast to what Peter wants and what Jesus has just said is enormous. Jesus is talking about a way of life that is based on following Jesus along the road to Golgotha. Peter is talking about putting Jesus into a tent and, presumably, having people come to visit him in the tent. At the end of the story Jesus will take the three disciples back down the mountain to the valley below, to the place where the people live, back into the world for that is where Jesus wants to be and needs to be. That is also where the disciples are to be. Not gathered around sacred tents on the mountainside but with Jesus in the midst of the world.

Importantly too for Luke is his debunking of the idea that Elijah, Moses and Jesus can all have a tent each as if they are all equals in the eyes of God. The voice that comes from God addresses this in an unambiguous manner: *This is my Son, the Chosen One.* Only Jesus is the Son. Elijah is not God's Son. Moses, great though he is, is not God's Son. Jesus is the Son of God and in Jesus alone can people come to the Father. And further on this God makes it clear that the response of the disciple to Jesus is to "*listen to him*". Elijah was indeed a great prophet and Moses the chosen leader of the people of God. But it is to Jesus that the people must now listen. Whatever of the great things God did in the past, there is a new action of God in the present and this is taking place in Jesus.

For Luke the presence of Jesus standing together with Elijah and Moses is a clear fulfilment of the promise Moses makes to the people in Deuteronomy 18:15 that *Yahweh your God will raise up a prophet for you, a prophet like myself.* Luke's extensive use of the image of Moses in his presentation of Jesus is connected with his basic message of Jesus as the Saviour of the people. God from the time of Abraham has sought to bring salvation to his people but they have rejected this offer over and over again. They have even killed the prophets he sent to announce this salvation. And they treated Jesus no differently. For Luke the difference is that while Jesus is a prophet, he is also more than a prophet. He is the Son and it while it is as a prophet he will live and die it is as much more than a prophet that he will rise again from the grave.

It is important for the disciples to know this at they move slowly towards Jerusalem and the death of Jesus. If Jesus was no more than just another prophet then they were a people without hope. Israel had rejected the prophets before and they were rejecting Jesus now. The big difference though is that Jesus is, according to the very voice of God, *My Son, the beloved* and if they listen to him, they will have life.

Conclusion:

Both of our readings today invite us to spend this second week of Lent exploring the role Jesus plays in our daily living. How do we deal with the kinds of situations in which Abraham finds himself: he has no so, he is old and his wife is old, yet he understands that God is offering a family as many as the stars in heaven. How can that be? It is the ultimate moment of faith when we have an opportunity to believe that God is at work or we turn in to our own resources for coming to an understanding of what is happening in the world around us. Looking at his life and his future

through the prism of his own humanity, he would have been filled with despair. Looking at his life through the prism of the promises of God, all things were possible.

This week we are invited to walk through our daily activities and work on examining them in the light of the promise of having God there with us. How does it change the way we act and speak and think if we perceive that God is there with us as we are acting, speaking and thinking? All of God's wonderful promises are ours if we allow him to bring them about. That is the message of Abraham.

And the transfiguration story challenges us to think about Jesus in the same light. How easy it is to turn him into some kind of divine spirit we can lock away in a "tent" and visit from time to time. He is a much more comfortable Son of God if he lives in a tent on the top of the mountain. But that is not how he is offered to us by God his Father. He is the Jesus who walks down from the mountain, out of the tent and into our lives in the valley below. As with the story of Abraham, we are invited to explore what it might mean to the way we live, and think, speak and act if we understood that Jesus was there with us, living, and thinking and speaking and acting alongside us. We are challenged to listen to Jesus to the point where our words and deeds are the words and deeds of Jesus. Nothing else will be acceptable.

And in a sobering note, Jesus makes it clear that this will only happen through our willingness and openness to having the cross at the centre of our lives. We are going to have to die to some of our self centred ways. There is no way to have a divine Kingdom without some dying and that is our task this week.