

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Ps 22

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

### With our minds set on the promises of God

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In Mark Peter's rebuke of Jesus' teaching about his coming suffering and death brings a stern reply: *Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but human things.* Peter is an earthly minded, reasonable man. Jesus' announcement that he is going to Jerusalem to die does not fit the hopes and aspirations he has for his leader. How would such suffering demonstrate the sovereignty of God? The rebuke comes because divine things are still a mystery to Peter. He has not understood God or the ways of God.

The idea is that faithful living involves setting our minds on divine things. In terms of the first and second readings today, this means putting our trust in the promises of God which are gifted to us without our asking for them or earning them in any way. In so far as there is any human part in faith, it involves responding to something that is given to us. In Romans Paul appeals to the story of Abraham to make his point. Abraham was an old, childless man with an aged, barren wife to whom descendants as numerous as the stars were promised. On all reasonable grounds there was no hope of one descendant, let alone many. The difference between Peter and Abraham is Abraham did not limit his thinking to what is known to be possible. Instead, **against all odds**, he chose to remember that the one who graced him with this promise was the one who brought life out of darkness at the creation. Abraham believed God. He believed in God's existence and he put his trust in the impossible possibility that was promised to him. In so doing he turned away from himself and towards the creator who willed that all people should have life and be blessed through his as yet unborn family. Abraham's trust was counted to him as righteousness. That is code for saying that he was delivered from everything that stood between him and God; he was at one with God; there was no difference between God's will and his.

Paul in Romans goes to much trouble to show that Abraham did not achieve oneness with God through fulfilling a legal contract. Rather, righteousness was born of God's prior gift and Abraham's unwavering confidence in God's promise to him. Unwavering confidence? Abraham did doubt, but only on the way towards the final outcome. Ultimately, even when the call to sacrifice his Son came, Abraham did precisely what was asked: he recognised God as God who could bring life where no hope of life was expected. Only faith, says Paul, can so honour God because it trusts God without resort to anything else. Abraham's faith was uncontaminated trust in the promise of God. And that trust was not sealed up as an idea in his head - it led him to action that bore witness to the grace of God and the power of God's promises.

Paul makes such a lot of Abraham because what is foreshadowed in him becomes manifest in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here the Beloved Son of God continued to trust, even to death on the Cross and was raised, not from a barren

womb, but from a deathly, cold tomb. And his rising brought life for **all**. This is the ultimate sign to us that in the midst of death and non-existence it is God who quickens and creates. That is what is meant by hope against hope: when, in human terms, Abraham and Jesus were non-events, then the promise of God showed itself to be potent and decisive. This week the ABC told the story of the Bomber pilot who, over enemy territory, had to bail out of his failing aeroplane at 20,000 feet. He did so without a parachute because it had already been burned to ash. The pilot fell 3 miles to earth. He was rendered unconscious after a couple of minutes and woke up, three hours later, in a deep snowdrift. This man leapt into the dark. Trust in God is not a leap into the dark. It is a leap into the promise of life.

The thing about the story of Abraham and the story of Jesus is that you either trust it or you don't. You either believe that our lives are held within a greater context of promised life which is gifted to us and over which we have no control, or you don't. Belief such as this has transforming power because it means we need not restrict ourselves to what seems reasonable and humanly possible. We will instead live according to divine possibilities, which range far beyond anything we can ever imagine.

In the Gospel today Jesus spells out what it meant when he earlier called the disciples to follow him and to set our minds on divine things. This has direct relevance to Peter who came out from behind Jesus and tried to direct operations. Peter had to learn that discipleship involved re-learning what it meant to set his mind on divine things. He had to re-commit to the one who called him. He had to take up his cross.

This year is the 100th Anniversary of the birth of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who said: *when Jesus calls us, he bids us come and die*. Given what happened to Bonhoeffer these words still resonate. However, it is also true to say that when Jesus calls us to follow we are called to enter into God's promise of freedom and life in such a way that death, being trapped in self-concern, is no longer a controlling force for us. It is the freedom that derives from this which enables people of faith all over the world to stand up and be counted when others would be frightened into silence. It is easy to see how the power of God's grace allowed some Christians to become giants and martyrs. Faithful living is not always so spectacular but it is found in the choices that ordinary people make on a daily basis. The choice to live in love, rather than hate or apathy. The choice is to support life, not to quench it. The choice to give stability while a partner or a family member struggles with life. The choice to forgo material reward for the sake of being involved in something that is life giving for others.

On the second Sunday of Lent the image of the Cross appears before us. As Peter's reaction shows, humanly speaking this seems to be a threat to life. But the gift we have been given is to see that the one who went to the Cross, did not pass out of range of the promised life of God. The eyes of faith are able to see that the Cross is a call to set our minds on divine things with fresh emphasis because it points us beyond human suffering and death to the giver of life, in whose care we live and move and have our being.