

SERM0673

St Marc Grenoble
Sunday 28 February 2021 (Lent 2)
Genesis 17: 1 - 7, 15 - 16
Mark 8: 31 - 45
'Covenant to Cross'

PRAY

It is wonderful to be back in church this morning, speaking to a live congregation, as well as to those who are joining us on Zoom, from around the world. What wonders 21st C technology gives us!

I'm not certain if it's the same here in France, but in the UK and many other places around the world, genealogy is a burgeoning hobby; it has also become big business - I think I've seen businesses like that here too.

Apparently, more and more people are anxious to know where they come from, and what their roots, origins and family histories are.

The BBC have a programme called 'Who do you think you are?', which investigates the family history of various well known personalities. One of the main features is that many of the participants find out things about their ancestors, of which they had no previous knowledge.

Sometimes, as well as being a surprise, what they learn about their ancestors is not always 'good news'; there's an unsavoury past lurking, which families have often tried to 'bury', or hide, over the years.

Well, today's reading from Genesis gives us a glimpse of the genealogy of God's people; the Children of Israel as they later became known. Of course, as the story unfolded over the years, that history did not always contain 'good news' either.

This morning's reading takes us right back to Abram, (which probably

meant 'my Father is exalted'), whom God renamed Abraham, which is taken, by some commentators, as witness to God's promise to make him the father of many nations.

We're told God appeared to Abram, who was 99 years old, and said to him: 'I am God almighty - walk before me faithfully and **be blameless**. Then (if you do) I will make my covenant (contract / promise) between me and you - and I will greatly increase your numbers.'

Now that may well have been quite a puzzle to Abram, because at 99 years old, (and Sarai, his wife, 90) they had no children. Yet, despite all that, God told Abram that his wife was to be known in future as Sarah, and that God would give Abraham, a son by her! That in itself must have been almost unbelievable.

You can almost picture Abraham thinking 'are you really sure about that God'??!! It was something to really test Abraham's belief and faith in God. (Remember, at that point, Sarah whose name with an ancient Semitic root probably means 'princess' or 'mistress', was already 90 years old!)

Furthermore, God said 'I 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.' Wow!

The story of Abraham is a remarkable one - with plenty of ups and downs - I'm not going to explore it any further just now; other than to say, as a result of God's covenant with him, Abraham is one of the founding fathers, one of the pillars of our faith - going right back into the genealogy of God's family.

That story goes back almost to the beginning of a long, very chequered and often surprising family history.

Sadly the Children of Abraham, more usually known as the 'Children of Israel', were often far from blameless and frequently chose to ignore the covenant Abraham had entered into with God.

This caused them all sorts of trouble in later generations; and again and again caused God to be very angry with them.

As we move on to our Gospel reading from Mark ch. 8, it is worth remembering that Jesus was sometimes described as a child of Abraham; so, in human terms very much part of God's family line. You could say Jesus definitely had the correct family history.

To begin to understand this Gospel passage, we need to appreciate the context. I wonder if any of you can remember what had happened immediately before this passage in Mark's Gospel??

Yes, Jesus had asked the disciples 'Who do people say I am?' - there were various answers (John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets etc.) but Jesus then asked the disciples: 'Who do YOU say I am?' To which Peter had replied, without missing a beat: 'You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God!'

It is that statement, which sets the scene for today's Gospel reading.

The disciples having, possibly for the first time, established the situation clearly in their minds; and acknowledging Jesus as 'Messiah'; we're told 'Jesus now began to teach them something new.'

Jesus began to explained to them what was going to happen to him, in clear and simple terms, so they could not miss it.

It must have been an awful shock for the disciples to hear Jesus explaining, in precise detail, how He was going to suffer - that He was going to be rejected, tried and killed, but He was going to rise again after three days.

Of course, this differed totally from their expectations for the Messiah. (Incidentally, it also, firmly, dispels any myth that the crucifixion was just an 'accident of fate'.)

But Jesus' assertion that He would rise again after three days, seems to have gone completely over their heads - which isn't really surprising, because it was totally beyond their human understanding. People do not die, then rise again; they simply didn't understand what Jesus was saying.

Jesus knew from the outset that He would have to suffer a very unpleasant death, to complete the task set for Him to redeem God's children, and re-establish our line of communication with God our heavenly Father.

Once again, Peter probably voiced the thoughts of all the disciples when he tried to remonstrate with Jesus. - They still had no understanding of what lay ahead, and they couldn't face any thought of their master being dealt with, in the way He was suggesting.

Apart from anything else, if you think about it, that probably wouldn't bode at all well for the disciples themselves!

But, Jesus looked around, saw the disciples wavering, and responded sharply: 'Peter, get out of the way! Get lost satan! You have no idea how God works!'

This still happens, doesn't it? All too often, we try and limit God's actions to our own, often very feeble, human vision. We try to box God into our own limited understanding of His mission - and His power!

We expect our all powerful God to conform to our very restricted parameters. We still have little real understanding of the simply amazing ways in which God really works!!

Calling the crowd to join them as He taught His disciples, Jesus clearly laid out the very real challenges and demands of discipleship.

In the NT for Everyone, Jesus' words are translated: 'If any of you want to come the way I'm going, you must say "no" to your own selves, pick up

your cross, and follow me. Yes, if you want to save your life, you'll lose it; but if you lose your life because of me and the Gospel Message you'll save it.'

Jesus went on: 'After all, what use is it to win the world and lose your life? (that is your eternal life) What can you give in exchange for your life? If you're ashamed of me and my words in this cheating and sinning generation, the son of man will be ashamed of you when He "comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels".'

And, we need to understand these challenges for those who are trying to live the Christian life, and follow Jesus, are just as vivid, or probably even more vivid, today, than they were over two thousand years ago.

Another translation puts the question this way: 'What could you ever trade your soul for?'

In this age of rampant materialism, that question is seriously challenging; and our response demands very careful consideration.

We should ask ourselves the question: 'How often do I trade my soul - and what for?? Or, perhaps, to put it another way: 'Is there anything, or anyone, for which or for whom, I would be willing to give up my life??'

These questions probably seem really challenging; and yet, in this 21st C world, you don't have to look very far at all to see people who have sold out their souls to greed, drugs, sex, money, or self gratification.

I have lost count of the number of times over the last couple of years, when there have been news stories about untimely and violent deaths - stabbings, shootings - often of very young people. Reports of threats, intimidations, robberies and corruption even at the very highest levels of public life; abuse of children, human trafficking, and much more... What could you ever trade your soul, or give up your life for??

Jesus says 'follow me'; that means we must let Him lead us, guide us and protect us. The NT for Everyone puts it clearly:

Jesus said: 'You're not in the driver's seat - I am.' He also said 'Don't run from suffering; embrace it! Follow me, and I'll show you how.'

It's true isn't it? Where suffering is involved, Jesus has been there before us, He's experienced more pain than most of us will ever meet.

He's suffered more loss than most of us will ever know. He suffered an excruciating death on the cross in order to redeem us and save our souls, to purchase for us the opportunity of eternal life, worshipping God face to face. That is truly something worth looking forward to and trusting Him for!

So, what will you trade your life, your soul, for?

Or will you allow Jesus to lead you in the right way - His Way?

We can be totally confident in Him, and trust Him to lead us to His Father's, our heavenly Father's, home.

Personally, I'd prefer Jesus to be in the driving seat of my life
- How about you??

So, now, as I close, let's just spend a moment or two, in silence, and reflect on our own lives: where we're going, and who we want in the driving seat?

Let's pray:

Lord Jesus, thank you for the suffering you endured, for our sake - Help us to allow you to lead us through the challenges and struggles of our daily lives. Help us to follow you, so when we finally come to meet you face to face, you'll be ready to welcome us to live with you, in your Father's home.

Amen