

Some thoughts on the Lectionary Readings for Year B – Second Sunday in Lent (2nd Service)

Lectionary Readings: **Genesis 12: 1-9**
 Psalm 135: 1-14 (15-21)
 Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16

From virus to vaccine in 10 months rather than 10 years – miraculous we may say! It is a reflection of how virologists today, understand the mechanism of infection and how to defend against it. It is not just one vaccine that has been developed but many - across the world - using a variety of approaches, some radical others traditional.

In Psalm 90, a Psalm of Moses, we read the traditional description of a life's span:

¹⁰The days of our years *are* threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength *they be* fourscore years, yet *is* their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away. (AKJV)

Modern science has contributed greatly to healthy living and as a result the average life expectancy is increasing year by year. In the UK, for the years 2017-2019, the average for a male was 79.4 years, for a female 83.1 years; an increase of 6.3 weeks for a male and 7.3 weeks for a female over the corresponding three year period published just a year earlier. Life expectancy, therefore, is probably longer in modern times than it has ever been before.

How then do we react when we read: (Genesis 12: 4-5)

⁴So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. **Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran.** ⁵He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

Going on - in Genesis 16: 15 we read that Abram was **86** when Sarai's maidservant bore him Ishmael; he was **99** when the covenant with God is renewed and his name changed to Abraham (chapter 17) and he was **175** when eventually he died (chapter 25).

To us, these seem to be events taking place at an unbelievable age – but they are nothing when compared to life spans recorded elsewhere in Scripture!

Noah was **600** years old when the floodwaters came and **950** when he died. Methuselah beats Noah by a few years - dying at the age of **969** he is the oldest person recorded in Genesis or anywhere else in the Bible

Returning to our OT reading – “The call of Abram” – we may be sceptical about the age at which the call comes but the account in Genesis makes it clear that God called a settled and prosperous Abram and called him to a new life of promise accompanied by uncertainty.

Genesis 11 traces the ‘family tree’ of Shem (one of the three sons of Noah):

Shem → Apphaxad → Shelah → Eber → Peleg → Reu → Serug → Nahor:

²⁴When Nahor had lived 29 years, he became the father of Terah. ²⁵And after he became the father of Terah, Nahor lived 119 years and had other sons and daughters.

²⁶After Terah had lived 70 years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran.

²⁷This is the account of Terah's family line.

Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. And Haran became the father of Lot.

²⁸While his father Terah was still alive, Haran died in Ur of the Chaldeans, in the land of his birth.

²⁹Abram and Nahor both married. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milkah; she was the daughter of Haran, the father of both Milkah and Iskah.

³⁰Now Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive.

³¹**Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Harran, they settled there.**

³²Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Harran.

Answering the call, Abram takes “his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot **and all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran**”. The prosperous man sets out for the land of Canaan, (fulfilling what his father had intended?) and it would appear travelled there directly – the footnote in NIV telling us that Shechem was in Central Canaan. In the previous chapter we were told that Sarai was not able to conceive but the Lord, in calling Abram, promises to make him into a great nation. The promise is repeated in 12:7, at Shechem – “*To your offspring (seed) I will give this land*”. Abram is in the land towards which Moses later leads the Israelites – the land that by then has become known as “the Promised Land”. With origins going back this far in Jewish history is it surprising that the ‘Promised Land’ has become a political ‘hot potato’ for many, many generations?

What does seem surprising in this account is Abram moving on from Shechem. The Lord has appeared to him there and made the promise of “*this land to your offspring*” - Abram responds by building an altar there to the Lord.

Then we read he travelled on to Bethel and finally continued towards the Negev – an arid desert region!

Perhaps the clue to his moving on is found in verse 6:

⁶Abram travelled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem.
At that time the Canaanites were in the land.

Psalm 135 begins with the instruction to “*Praise the Lord*”. We have seen before that the Hebrew consists of two words *Hallelu Yah* and we remember how often we make use of our contraction “Hallelujah”. “*Hallelu Yah*” appears again at the beginning of verse 3 and in verse 21 at the end of the psalm which thus commences and concludes with the words “Praise the Lord”.

Many hymns, especially those associated with Easter; contain “Hallelujah” or “Alleluia”. Two well known hymns in this category are Charles Wesley’s “Christ the Lord is risen today” (MHB 204) and the 14th Century “Jesus Christ is risen today” (MHB 205):

Christ the Lord is risen to-day; *Hallelujah!*
Sons of men and angels say: *Hallelujah!*
Raise your joys and triumphs high: *Hallelujah!*
Sing, ye heavens; thou earth, reply: *Hallelujah!*
(Charles Wesley)

Jesus Christ is risen today, *Hallelujah!*
Our triumphant holy day, *Hallelujah!*
Who did once upon the Cross, *Hallelujah!*
Suffer to redeem our loss, *Hallelujah!*
(14th Century)

‘Conference’, each year, commences with the singing of another hymn by Charles Wesley – “And are we yet alive, and see each other’s face?” (surely an appropriate hymn to sing later this year when we are able to reassemble!).

There are 6 verses in the hymn followed by a ‘doxology’:

Praise ye the Lord, alleluia!
Praise ye the Lord, alleluia!
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia,
Praise ye the Lord!

Matthew Henry writes an introduction to this psalm in his Commentary: (Early 1700’s)

This is one of the Hallelujah-psalms; that is the title of it, and that is the Amen of it, both its Alpha and its Omega. I. It begins with a call to praise God, particularly a call to “the servants of the Lord” to praise him, as in the foregoing psalm (v.1-3). II. It goes on to furnish us with matter for praise. God is to be praised. 1. As the God of Jacob (v.4). 2. As the God of gods (v.5). 3. As the God of the whole world (v.6-7). 4. As a terrible God to the enemies of Israel (v.8-11). 5. As a gracious God to Israel, both in what he had done for them and what he would do (v.12-14). 6. As the only living God, all other gods being vanity and a lie (v.15-18). III. It concludes with another exhortation to all persons concerned to praise God (v.19-21). In singing this psalm our hearts must be filled, as well as our mouths, with the high praises of God.

A much more recent commentary entitles this psalm - “**The Lord is Free in His Marvellous Acts**” – “It is a hymn of descriptive praise of God the Creator and Lord of history.” Five sections are identified:

- I. Israel’s Praise (v.1-4)
- II. The Lord’s Greatness as Creator (v.5-7)
- III. The Lord’s Acts in Redemptive History (v. 8-14)
- IV. The Inability of Idols (v.15-18)
- V. Israel’s Praise (v.19-21)

There is no Gospel reading in the Lectionary for this week; the sole New Testament reading coming from the letter to the Hebrews - a sustained passage on Faith.

The writer of Hebrews (some scholars think it was Barnabas, others think Apollos) was clearly steeped in Jewish Scriptures as ‘he’ describes the faith displayed by Abraham and by Sarah. There is also a description, in the omitted verses (4-7), of the faith displayed by Abel, by Enoch and by Noah.

The candidates for authorship were both, at one time or another, co-workers with Paul – Barnabas being commissioned by the Church in Antioch to accompany Paul on his first missionary journey and Apollos, one of the early evangelists establishing the Church in Corinth.

As we read this passage we are reminded of Paul’s teaching on Faith - that it involves uncertainty, maybe even doubt, but there is a confident ‘**Hope**’. This is made clear in his letter to the Romans: (Romans 8: 18-27)

Present suffering and future glory

¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

¹⁹ For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.

²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that^a the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.

²⁴ **For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?**

²⁵ **But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.**

²⁶ In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. ²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.

Footnotes

- a. [Romans 8:21](#) Or subjected it in hope. ²¹ For

Our passage from Hebrews begins with very similar words:

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

In chapter 6 the writer expresses ‘**The Certainty of God’s Promise**’ – we have commented on this in past weeks and today it links with our reading of Abraham in both Old and New Testament readings:

¹³ When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, ¹⁴ saying, ‘I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.’

¹⁵ And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised.

¹⁶ People swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. ¹⁷ Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. ¹⁸ God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged.

¹⁹ **We have this hope as an anchor for the soul**, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, ²⁰ where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek.

The New Testament reading concludes with the faithful of the Old Testament looking for something in the future; living by faith, with hope in their hearts, until they died - not having received at that stage the things that had been promised:

¹³ All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.

¹⁴ People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own.

¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return.

¹⁶ Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Let us pray for an equally strong and confident Faith in the Promises of the Lord.

Hark! The song of jubilee,
Loud as mighty thunders’ roar:
Or the fullness of the sea,
When it breaks upon the shore.
Hallelujah! For the Lord
God Omnipotent shall reign:
Hallelujah! Let the word
Echo round the earth and main.

Hallelujah! Hark! The sound,
From the depths unto the skies,
Wakes above, beneath, around,
All creation’s harmonies:
See Jehovah’s banner furled:
Sheathed His sword; He speaks – ‘tis done:
And the kingdoms of this world
Are the kingdoms of His Son.

He shall reign from pole to pole
With illimitable sway:
He shall reign, when, like a scroll,
Yonder heavens have passed away:
Then the end – beneath His rod
Man’s last enemy shall fall;
Hallelujah! Christ in God,
God in Christ, is All in all.

James Montgomery

My faith, it is an oaken staff
The traveller’s well-loved aid;
My faith, it is a weapon stout,
The soldier’s trusty blade.
I’ll travel on, and still be stirred
To action at my Master’s word;
By all my perils undeterred,
A soldier unafraid.

My faith, it is an oaken staff;
O let me on it lean!
My faith, it is a sharpened sword;
May falsehood find it keen.
Thy Spirit, Lord, to me impart,
O make me what thou ever art,
Of patient and courageous heart,
As all true saints have been.

Thomas Toke Lynch (alt.)