

Sermon at St Chad's, Ladybarn, 21st February 2016
2nd Sunday of Lent (Year C), Gen 15:1-12, 17-18; Phil 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

I was up late last night, glued to the news, and particularly the analysis and reports of negotiations about British membership of the EU, and the threat of a so-called "Brexit".

Questions of borders, citizenship, nationhood, sovereignty... these fill our newspaper columns and news programmes as much as ever.

I heard also this week, about Donald Trump's desire to build a wall between the USA and Mexico, and the critical words it has prompted from Pope Francis. He argued that it is more Christian to build bridges than to build dividing wall.

It seems to me that some of the defining and most urgent questions of our time are these:

How can we make this world a home for all?

Can we learn to live alongside those unlike ourselves?

What does it mean to be a citizen of anywhere?

Tragically, so often the means of giving a people a sense of secure belonging is by means of force and exclusion. Zealously enforcing borders, and scrutinising any who would come in, so as to keep out those who are perceived to threaten "our" way of life, life as we are used to it.

We heard a somewhat odd reading from Genesis, didn't we?

You may be glad to know I'm not going to dwell on the rending of animals which, as my wife, suggested, reads like something out of a Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall cookbook! I'd like to focus on the central theme, which is a repeating one in Abram's life.

The text spoke of land and descendants promised to Abram; it is another in a series of reassurances which God gives to Abram concerning his destiny.

This is a man who has upped and left his homeland after a revelation from the living God.

Against common sense, he surrenders security and familiarity, and becomes - for a time - a nomad learning to live by the promises of God. He often falls back into engineering some security and control for himself along the way, often with negative consequences, but God calls him back again to simple trust.

We are told that *this* - simple trust, taking God at his word - *this is what is seen by God as goodness.*

Many centuries later, as Abram's descendants retell to each other their founding story, they are told by God never to forget how they became who they are: by the faithfulness of God to a wandering Arabian called Abram. A refugee people, a nomadic people, a wandering people who found their God making his home with them as they wandered.

In our Gospel reading we find Abram's descendant, our Lord Jesus himself, on a journey without a place to call a permanent home.

His own people - the Jews - are having to wrestle in this time with questions of security and belonging as they live under occupation. They live with threat of Roman violence and the loss of control of their own destiny. Some took matters into their own hands and sought to take back their land and kick out the foreigners.

Others forged alliances with Rome to gain a little power for themselves, playing the political game to secure their own wellbeing. Jerusalem gave to the elite and the rich, at least, a sense of security and pride. At least Jerusalem gave them some kind of national unity and identity.

Yet Jesus' assessment of Jerusalem was, as we hear today, far from kind and affirming. He is warned about threats on his life coming from the Herod in Galilee, but Jesus knows his destiny is in God's hands, and lies in Jerusalem.

A showdown with the powers of this world - those of his own nation and the occupying force - would come in Jerusalem. Not a showdown of sword against sword but of love and forgiveness in the face of hatred and fear. Jesus has set his face towards the city which, despite appearances of stability and religiosity, was not ready to repent and welcome the kingdom of God.

Jesus laments; he doesn't take any joy in knowing that humanity will continue to resist God's way, God's call to welcome his kingdom. Jesus laments a Jerusalem which has faltered in its trust for God, the God who has loved the city and its people with an unending love.

Yet he longs still to gather all who would come to him. Our saviour does not draw battle lines but weeps for his own kindred who he longs to be at one with.

Barbara Taylor Brown offers this insight into Jesus' lament:

"If you have ever loved someone you could not protect, then you understand the depth of Jesus' lament. All you can do is open your arms. You cannot make anyone walk into them.

This is the most vulnerable posture in the world – wings spread, breast exposed – but if you mean what you say, then this is how you stand. Given the number of animals available, it is curious that Jesus chooses a hen. What about the proud lion of Judah, mowing down his enemies with a roar? Compared to the lion, a mother hen does not inspire much confidence.

But a hen is what Jesus chooses, which is pretty typical of him. He is always turning things upside down, so that children and peasants wind up on top while kings and scholars land on the bottom. He is always wrecking our expectations of how things should turn out by giving prizes to losers and paying the last first. So of course he chooses a chicken, which is about as far from a fox as you can get. That way the options become very clear: you can live by licking your chops or you can die protecting the chicks.”

And that is what Christ does - chooses death rather than abandoning us to our own devices.

We stand on the other side of the cross, the other side of Easter. But during Lent we recall again, as we must, that the way of the cross is not a detour for Christ, but the only way of undoing our rebellion of God and opening a new way to a new way of being human as children of God.

As we turn to consider St Paul’s words in Philippians, I am struck and unsettled by his very black and white language: there are Christians and there are enemies of the cross.

Is Paul simply drawing new lines, a new boundary which tells us who is in and who is out: who is accepted by God and who is not? Who are the enemies of the cross?

Well, Paul doesn’t single out people of other religions, or even the pagans of his day.

He says the enemies of the cross are not that people group or this nationality.

No; they are those who glory in the things which are actually shameful, those who make themselves god. They are not so much the failures of the world, but those who take pride in themselves and do not think they need God.

They are those who refuse God’s open handed offer, who refuse the shelter of the Mother’s wings.

And yet, Paul the former persecutor has himself been drawn to the Father by the one thing he used to see as shameful: the cross.

The cross is inverse of what the world offers us as identity, as security, as totems around which to gather and define ourselves. The cross exposes the very worst of what we can be

yet at the same time presents most starkly the lengths to which God will go to forgive, to undo evil, to remove the sting of death.

There is no place for pride at the foot of the cross, only humble, simple acceptance of the gift of forgiveness. At the cross we receive an identity which is not over and against anyone else. The cross is not a symbol to hold high as a sign of our superiority, something to glory in as a sign that our religion and way of life is better.

St Paul reminds us that by the cross, we are given citizenship in heaven. But I wonder what you think of when you hear “citizens of heaven”.

Other-worldly, head in the clouds, trying to escape the world?

Or belonging to an exclusive “in group” of God’s friends to the exclusion of his enemies?

I recently had my passport renewed so i could enjoy another holiday abroad. It is great to have something to show to passport control to enable an easy passage to so many places in the world. But “citizenship in heaven” is much more than just a passport to heaven when we die!

I think this kind of citizenship means *receiving* our sense of belonging, our ultimate sense of being at home from God. We are *given* an identity. We do not need to forge one for ourselves, whether by trying to be more religious than others, trying to prove we are good enough and of value to the world. To be a citizen of heaven means trusting God that being called is child is enough and is our deepest identity.

Seeing ourselves as having heavenly citizenship actually ***frees us from anxiety about who we are*** and where we can feel safe and at home. It liberates us to throw ourselves into this world to love it with tenderness, frees us to take risks in loving others.

To have heavenly citizenship is not to have a ticket to escape this bad world; rather it means receiving a mandate to be Christ’s hands and feet within it.

It means living by the pattern of the kingdom of heaven which Christ himself demonstrated: tending to the needy, lifting up the oppressed, speaking for compassion and justice for the poor, honouring the lowly, loving the outcast.

It means trusting in the loving Father, as Abram learned to, and not our own achievements, sense of goodness or the identities we make for ourselves.

To see ourselves as children who need their heavenly Father to show them how to be, how to love, how to live.

There is room beneath the wings of God for all who would come.

Far be it from us ever think that doesn't include us; far be it from us to ever turn any away from this welcome.

So today, as we are gathered again to be fed by the Christ who has laid down his life for us, I pray that we may know deep within our hearts the love and peace of Christ, and learn to be imitators of our him, that many in our world may be drawn to him.

Amen.