**Sermon for Lent 2, 28th February 2021**

Genesis 17:1-7, 15, 15

Romans 4.13-25

Mark 8.31-38

Last week we heard about the promise of God made through Noah, to all of humanity, that never again would God send a flood to cover the whole earth. This week we hear of a covenant made to Abram and his descendants, a specific group of people. Abram, 99 years old, who not for want of trying, does not have a child, an heir, is given a promise by God that a multitude of nations would be his descendants, that they would be exceedingly fruitful and have kings among them.

Anyone in their 90s, fancy that? Especially anyone who has not yet had a child? Want to be a father or a mother at that age? His wife Sarai was only 10 years younger. Quite something. God makes this promise, Abram believes it and God brings it about, changing Abram’s name, meaning ‘exalted father’,  to Abraham, ‘father of a multitude’, to reflect his change of circumstances.

What faith by Abraham - to believe God would do this. He is believing in something yet to happen, some future event that definitely needs God’s powerful and timely intervention. Without that, it is not going to happen. God made a promise to Abraham, and we know from history that God acted upon that promise, within the life of Abraham and his descendants and has brought that promise to fruition. To Jews this is immensely important, it is their foundation, the beginning of their nation. Abraham believed God, and God brought it about.

Paul in his letter to the church in Rome writes of this amazing faith of Abraham and credits this faith as righteousness. In the passage we heard, he uses the word ‘faith’ seven times and the word ‘promise’, five times and I highlighted them on the screen this morning. In the reading I highlighted two other words, grace and hope. It is by God’s grace, his unmerited favour to us that He acts in our lives. We do not deserve this, and it is a mystery of God’s love that he chooses to do this time and again. The promises from God, our faith that he will keep to those promises, the grace, the action of God in our lives, give us hope. Hope that the future will be fine, hope that all will be well.

Hope. What are you hoping for this Lent? Lose some weight? Get a haircut? See children, grandchildren safely back in School? Or are you hoping to get closer to God? Pray more, read the Bible more? Your hopes for this Lent - something to achieve before Easter.

Do you have hope for this summer? More freedom, some travel, meeting up with family/friends, a meal out? Or just a hug?

Looking further ahead. What about life beyond this life? What are your hopes for that?

In all of this how certain are you that your hopes will come to fruition? Have you received any promises from God to assure you of that?

When I look back over the years, I can name specific promises that God has made to me, to us. Some initiated change, gave us the courage, and the conviction to step out in faith. Others came at times of huge stress and brought reassurance that all would be okay, that God was with us in the stress. God’s promises came with grace to stand and keep standing, came with a certainty that God was present. Promise, faith and grace working to realise hope, affirm hope.

In this pandemic I hold on to those past promises and recall the faith and grace that accompanied them, and this helps me to hold on to God in the present, to live in the present, to trust God for the future, that in God’s timing society will open up again. It helps me to look for God in the everyday now, and to look with hope and trust to the future. There is one line in our Gospel reading that points us to this:  “For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Abraham set his mind on divine things - listening to God, being obedient, trusting God, trusting God’s promises. We are called to do the same, to look for what God is doing in this world, and to trust that He knows what he is up to. Peter took the obvious worldly route - “Jesus - the cross is wrong,” he said. In hindsight we can see a greater purpose was being brought about by God. Divine things.

Can we see a greater purpose in allowing this virus to go across the world? There certainly seems to be more focus on what is important in life, what is valuable, an increasing demand for justice and fairness and for some - more openness to God, to spiritual things.

Divine things. Do we trust that God is ultimately in control? That he is working his purposes out? Do we lean into him? Put our faith in Jesus, believe him to be God’s Son and our Saviour and Lord? Do we read and inwardly digest God’s word? Let the promises in them speak to us, become part of us - the anchor we hold on to in this storm, so that we can receive and know the grace of God working in us and through us?

These are all good things to do, but if you are like me you will need support and encouragement to continue with them, to go deeper with them.

Each Sunday in Lent in the morning service we will be saying psalm 130. This week I have moved it to after the sermon. As we read it together let the words encourage you, deepen your faith, your trust in God’s promises and to have hope, hope in his word.

Amen

The Revd Graham D Phillips

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Hebrews 11.1