**Sermon Lent 2, Sunday 13th March 2022 by The Rev’d Graham Earney**

Genesis 15.1-12,17-18

Luke 13.31-35

Rarely do our Sunday readings clash or come together with the current situation of the world as poignantly and strikingly as they do today. The gap between the timing of the Old Testament reading and the present day is millennia long. They are, however, essentially about the same thing – being a refugee – a stranger in a foreign land.

Our first reading described a particular point in Abram’s life – his name wasn’t changed until another similar experience in chapter 17. Clergy are taught to encourage everyone to read around the passage they are concentrating on. Usually this involves the story which comes before the passage and the one which comes after it.

In the case of this passage from chapter 15 of Genesis, we need to go much wider. This involves looking at how the whole book is composed. Almost all the first 11 chapters rush onward at almost breakneck speed covering what many would now classify as pre-history. From chapter 12 onward the pace drops dramatically. Each section is moulded round a character which we would now call a patriarch:

Chapter 11-27 to 25.11 The story of Abraham

Chapter   25.19 to 35.29 The story of Jacob and Esau

Chapter   37.2   to 50.26 The story of Joseph and his brothers The gaps in between contain genealogies.

Although not halfway through the story of Abram chapter 15, which we read from today, is a kind of pivot point around which the whole of Abram’s story revolves. Abram made the leap of faith to follow God’s call to leave his home in Ur of the Chaldees in chapter 12. He and his extended family wandered a kind of ‘Cooke’s Tour’ of the famous sites of the Middle East – Babylon, Haran, Aleppo, and Damascus to name but four! It was hard going – not just the distance travelled, but also that not everyone would have been glad to see them. They passed through what we call the Holy Land, passing through Shechem, to go as far as Zoan in Egypt before returning settling in Beer-sheba.

We picked up the story after Abram had intervened in the conflict between his nephew, Lot, and the king of Sodom. Because Abram had gained nothing from his intervention, God promises him that “his reward will be very great”. Abram’s reply is almost along the lines, “you have been stringing me along with promises ever since we left Ur, and I still don’t have any offspring by Sarai”.

This is the crux of the matter – it is about inheritance – of having a male heir to keep your name alive. In a time of oral transmission of family history it is imperative to keep telling the family story to each successive generation. A loose connection in Damascus will not do – Abram needs an heir if his name is to be known to history. God makes the covenant with Abram in the most generous way possible. It is the only example I can find in the Pentateuch where God makes a one sided promise – usually covenants require a change of heart on the part of the human involved. No such onus is placed on Abram. God goes beyond just an heir to promise that Abram’s descendants will occupy the land between the Nile and the Euphrates.

Before finishing this sermon I watched a programme from the Ukrainian Orthodox cathedral in West London. Among those who spoke were students, whose families had made them return to their studies here. As with so many others they told stories of harrowing experiences and difficult journeys almost beyond imagining. It was right they were in the Orthodox cathedral as the Ukrainians are a God-loving and faithful people – much more so than the general population of this country. However, it is ironic to think that faithful people in Russia are praying for the opposite outcome as their news come from the fake news of the state broadcasters.

I confess that over the last weeks I have watched the newscasts with tears in my eyes – not always tears for the same emotion. There have been tears of disbelief and horror – I really didn’t think I would see war in Europe again in my lifetime – I thought we had got beyond that. There have been tears of anguish as we have witnessed the individual experiences of those who have been bombed or shelled and who have fled over days to safety in Poland and the other countries bordering Ukraine. There have also been tears of joy at the overwhelming generosity of the ordinary people of Poland and the other countries in volunteering, coming to collect refugees, and taking them into their own homes. There have been tears of frustration at the seeming ineptitude of our government to help those with a right to come here to get into the country. I think that collectively the Home Office should be given ‘a blood transfusion’ of humanity and Godly love!

In the story from Genesis, Abram had to make no pledge to change his ways before getting God’s blessing – all he had to do was lay out the animals he would usually use to make sacrifice. In a similar way I suggest we lay out our four point plan:

1. To pray, as we will in this service for all those involved in the conflict in Ukraine – for those forced to be aggressors as well as the victims – that Ukraine is returned to the peaceful democratic country it was before the conflict. Pray daily, at the same time each day if possible – make it part of your discipline.

2. Support the relief effort – the aid agencies tell us that cash is better than goods. Remember Christian Aid was set up to help refugees after WW2 – The Red Bucket is in church today, and in following weeks. Sandra and I will be designating our Lent Lunch to the Ukrainian appeal.

3. Put pressure on our MP to get him to prompt the government to step into line with the rest of Europe and allow refugees from Ukraine to enter the country without the need for a visa.

4. When people come to this part of the country, do all we can to give them the assistance that they require.

It took time but the promise of God to Abram came true and Abraham’s descendants became numerous and occupied the land. It may take time for sanctions to bite on the Russian economy. They certainly will affect ‘the pound in our pocket’ – whether we like it or not we are bound up in what is happening in Ukraine. Let us pray that God gives us the strength to stand up for what believe in and do all we can for those who suffer at this present time.

Amen

Rev’d Graham Earney