

Sunday 28 February, 2021: Words to Worship By

A sermon preached by the Revd Canon Emeritus Chris Carolane, at St Paul's Cathedral on the Second Sunday in Lent.

Readings [Genesis 17:1-7; 15-16](#); [Psalm 22.23-end](#); [Romans 4.13-25](#); [Mark 8:31-38](#)

In our Gospel reading this morning, we read these words:

“Jesus called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” (Mark 1:34 – 35)

Immediately prior to Jesus saying this, he had asked the disciples who people thought he was, they told him that some thought him to be John the Baptist, others Elijah and others one of the prophets. When Jesus asked them who they thought he was, Peter declared: *“You are the Messiah.”* (Mark 1:29)

It was immediately following Peter's declaration, that Jesus began to teach his disciples that he must undergo much suffering and be rejected, killed, and three days later rise again.

Then, Peter was incensed. He took Jesus aside and rebuked him. In response, Jesus' rebuked Peter with a rebuke that must have shocked him:

Get behind me, Satan! You are not thinking in God's way, but in your human way. If you want to follow me, you have to take up your cross, deny yourself – leave aside earthly thinking – and follow me! (Mark 1:33 – 35)

Jesus understood that Satan was using Peter to tempt him to avoid the very thing that God had sent Jesus to earth to do – to die on the cross for the salvation of the world.

At the end of his ministry, as Jesus hung on the cross - beaten, bleeding, abused and shamed, he cried out in agony:

“Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” ... *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* (Mark 15:34)

The reality is, that obedience to our heavenly Father, following Jesus, living for God, and following God’s ways sometimes means that like Jesus, we must endure pain and suffering. Sometimes we are taken to the same place of despair that Jesus endured on the cross. And yes, for some Christians, it even means going to death itself through martyrdom. As Father Bob reminded us last week, like Jesus, we are called to endure wilderness experiences where, like Jesus experienced on the cross, it may seem that God has left us alone. However, as Father Bob also reminded us, the reality is that God never leaves us alone. As he was with Jesus in the testing of the wilderness, as he was with Jesus as he hung on the cross, as he is with us in our darkest hours, even though we may not recognise it at the time, God is with us even when we may feel he is not.

Abandonment is a terrible feeling. I think it is even worse than physical pain, or the trials and tribulations that life brings us.

I suspect that Abraham (in our Old Testament reading) must have felt somewhat abandoned by God when at the age of 99 he still had not fathered a child by his wife Sarah. God’s promise to him twice before that he would be blessed and would be the father of more descendants than the stars he could count in the night sky, must have seemed like a cruel and empty assurance. Abraham had given up so much for God. He had left his father’s homeland and gone to a place that he did not know in the assurance of this blessing that had not come. By all human reasoning the opportunity for his own descendants had passed. I don’t think I would have blamed Abraham for feeling that he had been fooled. Either God didn’t really exist, or God was cruel. But, as our reading showed us, God’s ways are not our ways! God came to Abraham and repeated his promise to him again. He would become the father of many nations. (Note that God didn’t say “one nation” but many! Abraham is the forefather of not only the Jewish nation, but of all Arabs.). Even in his old age and when by human standards Sarah was beyond childbearing, God blessed them with a son and God’s promise was fulfilled.

How wonderful! Can you imagine what Abraham's and Sarah's response to this much awaited blessing must have been. Surely, we would hope, they would fall on their knees in adoration of the God who keeps his promises, and whose plans are wonderful not only for the individual but for the world.

Abraham's and Sarah's wait for a son began at first as a joyful hope and promise of being the heirs of multiple generations of children. It moved through the sadness of month after month of yet another unsuccessful attempt at pregnancy and progressed to the terrible darkness of the assumption that that hope had now become a horrible curse of barrenness. But then – JOY! God's promise was finally fulfilled, and Isaac was born.

In similar, yet to a far greater degree, the joy of the realisation that the promise of the Messiah had been fulfilled, moved through dark times of Jesus' rejection by the authorities, his wrongful arrest, the terrible treatment by his own people and the Roman soldiers, to the agony that Jesus endured on the cross. Finally, it progressed to the darkness of death and the apparent abandonment of the tomb on Easter Saturday. But then, when the women ventured to the tomb on Easter Sunday morning – JOY! Again, God's promise had been fulfilled. Oh, to praise God for his wonderful power over death!

Those of you who know the Scriptures well, will realise that those awful words of apparent abandonment from Jesus on the cross – *"My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?"* are in fact the first words of this morning's Psalm – Psalm 22.

Psalm 22 is both haunting and beautiful. I encourage you to go home and read the whole Psalm from beginning to end. In the first part of the Psalm that we did not read this morning, the Psalmist cries out to God in a feeling of abandonment and desperation. God seems to be attacking him on every side. One commentator, John Goldingay, writing about the Psalm makes this observation:

"the question is more a cry of pain and protest than a request for information, but there is a general answer to the question why God does not intervene. God did not make the world a place

where he would be continually stopping people from doing wrong to one another. Maybe you think God should have made the world that kind of place, but God did not do so. Sometimes God intervenes; often God doesn't. The presence of Psalm 22 in the Psalter as a prayer for people to pray makes it possible for us to ask, "Why?" and to utter our protest; the fact that Jesus takes up the question encourages us to assume that we can ask it too. It presupposes that God is there and is listening. As was the case at the cross, God is not miles away in an aseptic environment in heaven. God is listening and watching and suffering with us."

In verse 23 of Psalm 22, where we commenced our reading today, the Psalm makes a pivotal change.

The psalmist stops crying out and asking his rhetorical questions of God and declares that rather, he will worship God!

"I will tell of your name to my companions: in the midst of the congregation will I praise you."
(Ps. 22:23)

He then goes on to say why he can do so.

- God has not despised nor abhorred the poor in their misery (v. 25)
- the ability to praise God comes from God alone (v. 26)
- the meek shall eat of the sacrifice and be satisfied and those who seek the Lord will praise him (v. 27)
- all the families of the earth should turn to God and all will worship God (v. 28) (And of course this is in fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham that through him all the nations of the world will be blessed.)
- because the Lord is KING! (v. 29)
- God has saved my life for himself and my prosperity (those yet to be born!) shall serve him! (v.31)

We may feel abandoned – but we are not!

As the Psalmist says in the very next psalm, though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death (those deepest and darkest places of apparent abandonment) we will fear NO evil because God IS WITH US. God's rod and staff give us comfort. (Ps. 23:4)

And so, with the saints of old, we fall on our knees in worship. Praise be to his name!