

Sermon Eucharist Lent 2 17th March 2019

***May I speak in the name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen***

*Our citizenship is in heaven,
and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour,
the Lord Jesus Christ
Stand firm in the Lord*

In my role as University Chaplain
I occasionally get invited
To lead seminars on topics
Related to Christianity

The most recent invitation
Was to run some sessions
With the title
Wellbeing and Spirituality

a week ago
I spent a fascinating and enjoyable afternoon
With three distinctively different
Groups of students

During these sessions I learnt three things

The first
Is that when young people
Say they are spiritual not religious
They are very clear what that means

They are expressing a belief
In something other than the world we see
Something they call a higher power
But a power they do not try to name
Or engage with

The second
is that these groups
defined faith

As belief in something
You cannot prove
But did not relate faith
directly to religious belief
or experience

And the third
is that Friday afternoon
in a warm dark room
Is perhaps not the best time
To teach meditation

These sessions are part of a module
About resilience
For musicians and performers

People who face uncertainty
And set backs
Due to the nature of their profession
They need to learn to bounce back
To return to their normal shape
After failure or disappointment
In an uncertain world

Uncertainty about the future
Is a feature of today's readings

Readings which also share
the hope of fulfilment of things promised
Of expectations for the future
And of faith in God

Abram believed the LORD;
and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

The Old Testament reading
Is an account of the Lord appearing
To Abram in a vision

Abram has just brought peace to his land
By bravery and diplomacy
And yet Abram is troubled

Abram is anxious about material things
The classic things most people care about
Family, children, property

Abram appears to have given up,
His expectation now is that nothing will change
He will have no offspring
And will have to adopt a slave child
To be his heir

in his dreamlike vision
Abram hears the Lord
who first reassures him with words

But then the Lord takes Abram outside
And invites him to
'Look towards heaven and count the stars',
Then the lord says, 'So shall your descendants be.'

Have you ever been somewhere
Where there is no light pollution
And looked up into a clear night sky?

Can you remember how that felt?

For me
It is staring into infinity,
Both crushed by the scale of creation
Overwhelmed by the beauty
Above and around me
Overwhelmed by the realisation of God

Abram, staring into the night sky
Heard the Lord's promise
Of numerous descendants
Experienced the Lord with him
And around him
And Abram believed

And due to his belief
The Lord made a covenant
With Abram and his descendants

Abram believed the LORD;
and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

today's gospel
gives contrasting image of God
An image which
Rather than being cosmic in scale
is intimate,
Tender and domestic

Jesus has paused
on his journey to Jerusalem
a journey of faith
as he moves resolutely
To meet his destiny
as God's prophet and messiah;

and here
as the Pharisees try
to divert him from his destination

Jesus makes a cry of lament
Over the city and people of Jerusalem

Jesus describes himself
As wishing to be
Like hen gathering her chicks
The chicks who look to her for safety
Who trust in her power to protect them

Jesus laments
Because the people reject him
They do not trust Jesus
They have no faith in Jesus

Faith in Jesus
which is at the heart
Of Paul's concern
For the Christians in Philippi

There are problems in this community
A community who were
Specially close to Paul's heart

It seems that some Christians
Those named in the reading
as enemies of the Cross

Have found themselves
In a spiritual place
Where they are no longer able
To recognise God
and God's purposes for them

Paul's desire is that they can return
To the faith he has taught
He reminds them
what it means to follow Jesus
in his words

*Our citizenship is in heaven
And it is from there we are expecting a Saviour
The Lord Jesus Christ*

Paul exhorts them to stand firm in that faith
to stand firm in the Lord

Today is the second Sunday in Lent
A season when we are encouraged
To deepen our faith,
By prayer, study and self-examination

So I ask myself and all of us

What does it look like to stand firm in the faith?
How does that change us?

How does it change our relations
with our communities and with the world?

We come to worship today
Reflecting on
a week of confusion in this nation
As parliament wrestles
With the complexities of Brexit
And fierce emotions
Swirl around very complex decisions

And we come
Appalled by a devastating act of hatred
of murder and destruction
in the attack on Muslims at prayer
in Christchurch a few days ago

For me standing firm in the faith
Is to try and be aligned with God's kingdom

C.S. Lewis in his science fiction trilogy
Gives an image which resonates with me

Lewis envisages a war between worlds
And describes the eldils
The Angel guardians of the planets
In this way
'They were standing not quite vertically
in relation to the floor of the valley
but to Ransom it appeared
that the eldils were vertical
it was the valley,
it was the whole world of Perelandra
that was aslant'

For me that describes
A Christian's orientation towards God
We are aware that our world is aslant

Part of my role as University Chaplain
Is to be alongside young people
Experiencing uncertainty

And give them words
To describe their spirituality
Their experience of a higher power
So that they too
may come to know and follow
The Lord who became human in Jesus Christ

The Lord who we meet here
Through God's word
And in the Sacrament of the Eucharist

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