

## **Living Faith**

A sermon prepared by The Revd Sarah Flashman for St Peter's Stewardship Sunday, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent, 28 Feb 2021

*Refs: Genesis 17 v 1-7 & 15-16, Romans 4 v 13-25 & Mark 8 v 31-38*

### **The Heart of the Lenten Journey**

As we immerse ourselves once again in this season of Lent, characterised as it is by prayer, self-examination and discipline, we take this opportunity as followers in the Way of Christ to offer ourselves afresh to the calling of mission and ministry in our local church. Part of our calling is self-giving and part of our self-giving is offering to God in love and obedience our time, our gifts and our finances. We give to him recognising he first has given to us ultimately in the person of Christ Jesus who gave himself for love of us. The lectionary readings for this second Sunday in Lent provide a lens for our reflections;

### **God's Calling**

We're first reminded of the call of Abraham in our Genesis reading. Such a call involved him leaving all that was familiar and known, to follow the voice of God in order to realise the promises of God for himself and all future generations. He couldn't then see all that that involved, but what he could grasp was enough to fire his faith! The call of Jesus also demanded sacrifice in obedience to his father, a kenosis; a self-emptying on our behalf which would become for us the new covenant. For this, Mark reminds us, he was to suffer and his suffering and sacrifice will occupy our reflections as we journey towards Good Friday.

### **God's Covenant**

For a moment let's travel back to Genesis and watch as God sets out his covenant before Abraham. Abraham's response is to fall on his face, prostrate in humble obedience. It is a moving picture! God's opening as he appears to Abraham, in these first three verses of chapter 17, offer something of a prelude, and here there is not a bargain to be struck. No, rather, here are the conditions in which God can give not get! He gives and his giving is infused with a longing that this will be no long distance or half-hearted relationship with Abraham and his descendants. This is El Shaddai translated as '*God who is sufficient*' and this is the starting point of God's call and covenant. God initiates and gives overwhelmingly, recognising the frailty of humankind; so often hard pressed and needing reassurance. Abraham's prostrate form offers a visual reminder of our dependence upon the God who initiates and provides.

### **God's Provision**

God's covenant promises to Abraham are rooted in truth. His promises are real and always fulfilled and Paul, writing to the Roman church, shines a light on this as he puts Abraham's faith into the spotlight. Abraham couldn't see what we see now, yet he chose to trust and believe in God's provision which developed faith. Friends, there is much we now cannot see of the path ahead, a fair degree of uncertainty remains, but I am challenged in these days, in the light of scripture, to hold on to the promises of God as I give myself again to the task of loving him with all I have. This is what develops faith and faith must be outworked tangibly in our lives as Christians. When we remind ourselves of these fundamental promises and God's provision we are spurred on to greater faith. Jesus himself would have said the daily offices of the Shema and the Amidah which focused upon the imperative to respond to God's love by loving him back totally and completely and, the promises

of God respectively. Ultimately Jesus became the promise of God fulfilled as he gave himself to the cross, dying in our place. He gave himself; fulfilling his calling, becoming a new covenant and realising the promises of God; the ultimate provision for all that we need!

### **Our Response**

And so, the unexpected has happened! A global pandemic! In God's economy, his love, his work, the *missio dei* and his calling to each of us remain unchanged however. In each season, we are called afresh to work out that calling with deepening faith under the new covenant with all its provision and this season has thrown at us some real challenges.

Our own differing financial positions, for example, often match our differing experiences of this COVID pandemic and, as a leadership team, we want to say a huge thank you for all you continue to give in time and commitment and especially at this time in financial offering. Inevitably, as a church we are not untouched by depleted resources and during this week you will receive a letter from the Stewardship Team who will helpfully lay out the specific needs and difficulty we are facing. We are not alone. The church nationally and all churches face the same challenge. But I pray that today as we lay hold again of the call of God upon our lives and together as a church, each of us will be able to respond in whatever way we can, with faith and expectation, so we can begin to address the financial shortfall and look to raising a minimum of £20,000 extra income for the year ahead. We have much to look forward to, as we emerge from COVID restrictions and welcome in due course a new vicar. New opportunities are all around us as together we embrace God's call, in the knowledge of being held within his covenant love and provision. May our faith be developed, may our hearts be encouraged and may the mission and ministry of both our churches be reignited. In the name of Jesus. **Amen**