

Sermon for 25.2.18

I love the story of God, Abraham and Sarah. I'm sure we know it well – how God promised to make a covenant between himself and Abraham and to make Abraham the ancestor of a multitude of nations.

And to Sarah the same - she would give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.

In her very old age she would bear a son for Abraham and what had been promised would come to fruition.

Of course conceiving and bearing a child by a couple aged 99 and 90 was laughable.

Certainly laughter was Abraham's immediate response. It was laughable because it was impossible.

But God will be God and this powerful biblical story, understood either as metaphor or historic reality, delivers a message that connects the righteous faith of Abraham in God, with God's faithfulness to promise, which goes well beyond our sense of reason and the borders of worldly possibilities.

It is a story of God's grace that brings into existence things that do not exist, as Paul tells us in the epistle - and human response to such amazing grace.

Now when we turn to the gospel reading we hear a story that delivers a parallel message.

Today's gospel passage follows directly on from Peter's confession at Caesari Philipi that Jesus is the messiah, the anointed one.

Today's gospel story is about Jesus telling the disciples what sort of messiah he is, and what their response is to be.

As the Messiah, he is to suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise up.

Now this is not the job description of the messiah that the religious tradition of the day imagines.

The well-formed popular definition of Messiah at this time, is more of the essentially elitist type– not the suffering type.

Peter resists the very idea of a suffering messiah, and takes Jesus aside and rebukes him.

But for Jesus there is no other way – he in turn rebukes Peter with words that cut to the core – Peter is not doing the work of God – his mind is on earthly ways –he is in reality trying to keep the faithfulness of God in the boundaries of worldly possibilities, at the very time Jesus is about to break through their borders.

The kingdom of God that Jesus is establishing is one in which the fullness of humanity will be realised both individually and corporately.

Therefore, for this to happen, the title Messiah has to be filled with a very different, new content. It has to be filled with someone, rather than some ideal - someone who has experienced both the ways of humanity to the fullest - and the graces of divinity.

Now Jesus doesn't keep the disciples wondering how they are to respond to him in this role. He tells them and us plainly what that response is to be.

We are to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him.

Now over time to deny oneself has often been understood as saying "no" to something one really wants, or foregoing something deeply enjoyed –like denying yourself your favourite ice-cream or chocolate or a strong coffee in the morning to get oneself up and about.

But as contemporary theologian Walter Brueggemann suggests, even though these are not bad disciplines in themselves, they are not the point of what Jesus is saying.

Brueggemann points out that the call to discipleship is not a program to make us feel bad or impoverished or uncomfortable.

He believes that Jesus is talking about us coming to see that God, the one who gives good gifts, and who calls into existence things that do not exist, is the centre of our life, and that the self-taken-alone does not have the resources or capacity to enjoy life to the full.¹

To deny self means to deny self sufficiency or self-securing or self dependence.

To take up our cross is to die to self-sufficiency, self-securing, self dependence- and to follow Jesus is to live in communion with God and to know that our life is safely and well held by God, who loves us more than we love ourselves.

Let us pray: *Dear Lord, may you be at the centre of our lives for our true life is found only in you. May we let go of all that is not life, all that is not you that we may live in that freedom granted through the cross. Amen*

¹ Walter Brueggemann: *A Way other than our Own*, compiled by Richard Floyd, WJK, Kentucky. 2017. P's 28-29.