

## Lent 2 Year C, Genesis 15, Luke 9 (Transfig.)

“And Abram believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.”

I have been known, from time to time, to succumb to the vice of pub quizzing. Not a casual turn up and win a round of drinks, you understand, but an organised league of pubs and teams of people with nothing better to do than recite the order of American presidents or the battles of the Wars of the Roses. It is an indication that general knowledge of scripture has greatly diminished that questions concerning 50s pop music are always far harder than questions about the Bible. In days gone by, there were such things as Bible quiz books, which would assume a rather greater familiarity with the texts than I suspect most of us have – what is the name of the scribe of Paul’s epistle to the Romans, that sort of thing. (The answer is Tertius, by the way). One such question might be, how many covenants are there in the Old Testament? To answer that, we need to think of several different people: there is the covenant with Noah, the covenant with Abraham, the covenant with Moses, the covenant with David. But it’s even more complicated than that, because Abraham alone seems to be the recipient of at least two different covenants, and there are at least five occasions when the Lord

makes to Abraham the promise of future progeny prosperity which goes with the covenant he has made.

In this morning’s story, from Genesis 15, we find Abram before he has gained the extra syllable in his name. The Lord’s communication with him is nothing if not strange. Abram is to take a number of offerings, cut them in half, and place them against one another; when night falls, a smoking pot and a flaming torch passes between the pieces of meat, and the Lord’s covenant is made. However, before these bizarre goings on, Abram has already stated his faith in the Lord’s power to fulfil what he promises – your descendants shall be as the stars. And Abram believed God, and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.

That verse is one of the most significant, and one of the most discussed, in scripture. For Paul in the Letter to the Galatians, it is the basis of his insistence that the people of God – the children of Abraham – are not defined by the observance of the law, but through the faith which trusts in God and in his promise. This faith is not human achievement or effort, but the counterpart to God’s gracious initiative in taking the lead, in coming to meet us – either in dramatic theophany as to Abraham, or in personal and substantial form in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. All God’s promises to his people, to Israel and to the

children of Abraham, are brought to fruition in the new covenant which has been brought about in Christ.

Theophanies are not, by definition, everyday experiences. The evangelists tell the story of the Transfiguration not simply to remind us who Jesus really is, but also to remind us that Jesus's ongoing revelation of his identity, his divinity, did not take such an earth shattering form. He reveals himself to the world in love, in words of love and in actions of love, not in dazzling brightness with angels and prophets, but in weakness and submission as he moves ever closer to the cross which is his fate. The privileged disciples – only three, not even all twelve – were exposed to something they did not, and could not fully understand. Only the full revelation of the God of love would finally enable them to look back and make sense of that snapshot of Jesus's heavenly identity.

The Christian life is, in this sense, something very ordinary. It does not consist in frequent explosions of supernatural divine power. If we are fortunate enough to have dramatic experiences in which we can see the grace of God at work, we ought also to be looking for mundane experiences for the same thing, because the doctrine of the incarnation is the teaching that God identifies himself with ordinary things and ordinary people. The story of Abraham as it unfolds contains its fair

share of drama, but it is also a story about people: about the problems of having children, the difficulties of sexual jealousy, the dangers of neglecting God in favour of hedonistic indulgence, the fear of losing one's offspring. The story of those disciples who were present on that mountain is also a story of ordinary lives – of people who are jealous, uncomprehending, selfish, treacherous, bewildered. But also people who are the medium of God's work, those through whom he chooses to act in the world. What keeps them moving forward is their faith and their trust in him.

It is easy to be dismissive of such an approach to the Christian life. God can be used as an excuse for idleness – if God wants such and such to happen, it will happen, I don't need to do anything towards it myself. Wrong. Who are we to decide for God almighty the ways in which he chooses to act? If we as a church identify particular needs in our ministry, there are two things that must be done: the first is that we must pray, and continue to pray, for the grace to meet those needs; the second is that we must do something about it.

To come together each week on the day of resurrection, to celebrate the presence of Christ and rejoice at all his blessings, is something which shows us to be very fortunate. With so much negativity associated with the church at large, it is important for us to give thanks for all the

positives of our life as a church, to take comfort if things are going well. But we may only take that comfort if we recognise that, if things are going well, it is simply as sign that God has more, much much more, for us all to do. To see the effects of God at work is a tremendous privilege, but also a tremendous responsibility. What happened to those disciples on the mountain? – they went on to do rather more than stand and watch and wonder. Abram believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness not because he said a loud “Well done” to what the Lord had already shown him, but because he trusted in the promises that the Lord had made concerning the future, because he set about living and working, in hope, to help that future be brought to fruition. A worshipping community is defined not by the worship itself, but by the community’s relationship with the God it is worshipping. Our God is the God who reveals himself to us in signs and in wonders in this place, and he is also the God who calls us down from the mountain to work, without question and without end, for the growth of the gospel. Can we do it? Can we trust? Do we, in fact, believe?