

DON'T JUST GIVE IT UP FOR LENT LET IT GO!

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Sunday, February 28th 2010

Lent 2

Gen 15:1-12,17-18; Luke 13:31-end

10.30am

Rochester Cathedral

The OT and Gospel readings this morning both cause us to think of a journey.

In the gospel we see Jesus on a journey, knowing the destination to be Jerusalem but not entirely sure what awaits him when he gets there. In the OT we see Abram aware of what awaits him at his destination, yet not knowing where that destination might be. Two journey's, separated by thousands of years, yet united in the understanding that it is God that is calling the shots.

In both journeys we see a realisation on behalf of both Jesus and Abram that if they are going to move forward on their journey then there is a need to release their grip and attempt to control things and simply allow God to be God. If their journeys were going to be of benefit to themselves and their loved ones ... they were going to need to let go of their own control.

We can all think of stories and incidents where we need to let go in a real way.

On Sunday 20th April 2008 Father Adelle de Carli took off from Paranagua in Brazil attached to 1000 helium balloons. He was trying to break a record and promote religion. He got blown off course and taken out to sea. 5 days later his balloons were found and, sadly his body was recovered 4 months later. He had with him a satellite phone and floatation equipment, and so friends and family wonder why he did not just let go and float closer to shore to be rescued, rather than persist with his attempt and be blown further into the Atlantic Ocean.

I have also experienced this letting go in a church setting when I was on placement with Church of the Apostles (referred to as COTA) in Seattle last month.

COTA is a church of around 200 people, mainly under 30, about $\frac{3}{4}$ who have got fed up with established church for a variety of reasons. 7 years ago the bishop asked Karen, a priest, to set up a new style of church that engaged with the culture of Seattle and gave her a redundant church building to make use of. Karen's task was to find people that may be interested in a new way of being church my reason for being on placement there was due to my job being more or less identical (the only difference really being I don't have a redundant church building to make use of).

For the first 2 or more years Karen was virtually alone. Things were slow and she soon realised that she needed to let go of her personal ideas about what this church would look like and listen to God. She needed to let go of her opinions and try to discover God's. Karen told me that she came to a realisation that she needed to let go of trying to force things quickly and allow God to take control and determine the timing.

I noticed this is still the case today: at COTA when people come to Karen with an idea her response is 'go try it' acknowledging that although this may not fit with her initial thoughts it may well fit with God's plan. Some of these things have worked and some haven't - but the important thing is that the church is alive with people having, and not being afraid to step out with, new ideas. Karen who has been a priest now for 20 years is regularly told by colleagues she is wrong and needs to stop this or start doing that but thankfully the bishop supports her and COTA continues to grow. In the last 3 years it has sent around a dozen young people to train for ministry. While these are not signs that everything is fantastic, cos it aint, but it is a sign of good health.

In a similar way Jesus is told to stop and get out at the start of our gospel reading. We see here not a very well disguised threat - Get away / stop doing this or Herod's going to kill you. This was a real threat - this was the same Herod who had just had John the Baptist beheaded. The threat is real and yet Jesus' response shows no fear. In fact his response is better than that; 'tell that fox....' is an insult. This is the one and only time we see Jesus treating anyone with contempt. It reminds me of living with my teenage children!

It's like Jesus is saying to Herod - well you might think you are in charge ... but actually ... I've been given a job here by God and I'm just going to get on with my daily work (I think that's what all that today and tomorrow stuff is about!) as given by God and it will be God, not some King, who decides when, and if, I die! Jesus could have got up and walked away; he could have moved to safety; but instead he chooses to give up that control that he has over his personal circumstances and allows God to be in control instead.

While Jesus already has that realisation that God needs to be allowed to be in control, Abram comes to understand that in the reading we heard from Genesis.

Initially here we see Abram in a crisis of faith. 'Don't be afraid Abram, I'm going to reward you!' says God. 'Yeh rite!' says Abram (is there some teenage thing going on here again?!) '...you say that but what you gonna do?! I still have no children! I still have no heir! So I'm going to have to adopt a slave as my heir!'

You can sense the frustration there. Abram has heard this promise, a few chapters back. he was 75 years old when he was told he would father a great nation and if we read on at the age of 99 he has still not seen this promise come to reality. That is 24 years of waiting - and they int getting any younger!!! Abram, and Sarai, hasve heard the promise of an heir but live in the everyday reality of barrenness. A promise has been made to this couple - bit circumstances make it impossible to see.

It's no wonder there is a crisis of faith here. 24 years of waiting!! How do you continue to trust in a promise when all the evidence around you is against it. That's probably a key question for all Christians. Walter Brueggemann (professor of OT at Columbia Theological Seminary), and by far my favourite OT scholar, says 'this is a scandal that Abram faces ... and has been facing and continues to face.'

We believe in a God of love, we believe in the return of jesus, we believe in a new heaven and a new earth when pain and suffering will be no more, and we believe that God can cause that to happen whenever he wants and yet we wait and wonder why not now and we embrace the scandal that we do not fully understand.

Abram has sunk to that point where he is believing that there will not be any change and that he has heard wrong. I can so relate to this even if on a much smaller scale. The first few months i started to visit w/s no one spoke to me, people ignored me and pretended I was not there. I believed God was saying this was the place to get to know people, and yet the reality of abuse and uncomfortableness said the opposite. I looked at the people around and thought 'there is no way these people are ever going to talk to a vicar.' 18 months on the reality is very different. I can now believe again I am in the right place from what I have seen, but Abram does not see anything.

And yet verse 6 kind of hits you. 'And he believed the Lord'. hay, hang on did I just miss something? When I first read that I sat up with a jolt and thought I must have dozed off while reading the passage - its been known to happen. But no, I looked again and saw that I had not missed anything; there are no new words from God, no new signs (theres the stars but Abram sees them every night), no eloquent arguments or signs from God! So why the sudden change of heart?

Why does Abram now believe this promise? Is he having new thoughts about Sarai? Does he suddenly feel new generative power in his loins? I doubt it - we think he's in his 90's which I think puts him even beyond viagra!!!!

So what has happened!

I believe there is only one explanation. Abram has come to rely on the promise maker, on God. God gives the promise and God gives the ability to make it believable. Abram seems to have a new awareness that God is really well ... errr ... God!

There are no fancy words here from God, no new scenarios, no new visions. There is certainly no coercion of any kind. Abram simply realises that God is God ... and that rather than trying to control things by forcing the hand of God he has realised he has needed to simply let go of the situation and let God take it up.

Abram has had a turnaround. A repentance if you like. He has given up the view of reality based on what he can see and control and he trusts in God who Abram believes will make a difference. Abram has realised, Bruggemann says, that he needs to relinquish control of the present for the sake of a genesis.

It seems to me that Abram is letting go of an old image of God and allowing God to enlarge his understanding of who God is.

So as we mark this 2nd Sunday in Lent I think I have come to a view, that may be wrong but I offer it for your consideration; that if Lent is more about letting go of stuff than it is about giving up stuff then first and foremost it is about letting go of our old images and understandings of God and allowing him to redefine our understanding of who God is..

As we allow God that freedom over our lenten journey maybe our images of reality based on what we can see will be transformed into those heavenly images of renewal that we all long and pray for.