

Second Sunday of Lent 2021 (28.02.2021)

Genesis 17: 1 – 7, 15 – 16; Mark 8: 31 – end

For some reason when I first started looking at this morning's Bible readings, what popped into my mind was one of the Radio 4 comedy quiz shows – I think the one I'm thinking of is "I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue."¹ It's the one where coves like Graeme Gardiner and Barry Cryer are given a subject and they then have to talk on it but they have to conclude what they're saying by connecting it to some saying or phrase, which they normally do by virtue of some dreadful pun. Now, although it's true that these two readings did make me think of that, it wasn't entirely logical. But what I was thinking was that we could devise a quiz to try to think up some highly entertaining link between the readings set on a given Sunday morning.

¹ A correspondent subsequently informed me that what I had been thinking of was 'My Word' which ran on Radio 4 from 1956 to 1990, the spoof explanations of well known sayings being given by the resident panellists, Frank Muir and Denis Norden.

Sometimes it's easy to see the theme that connects them, and sometimes it's nigh on impossible. And when it is, you've probably noticed that I often succumb to the temptation to preach on only the Gospel reading and then blithely leave some random Old or New Testament lesson read but quietly forgotten.

Today we need to work out the connection on the Second Sunday of Lent between a Gospel reading foreshadowing and warning the disciples about the crucifixion of Jesus and a reading from Genesis about old Abram and Sarai being appointed the ancestors of great nations through a son born in their old age and having their names changed to Abraham and Sarah. And that makes it one of those Sundays when it's tempting just to concentrate on the Gospel.

Because there is a clear and coherent Lent theme to be got out of Mark 8. Half way through the Gospel Jesus expressly warns his disciples he's going to suffer and

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

be rejected and will be killed and rise again; and if they're going to hitch their wagon to his cause, they're going to have to be prepared to undergo that agony with him. Similarly, in our Lenten journey, if we're going to keep a holy Lent, we're going to have to walk that journey with Jesus and in our spiritual imaginations accompany him through the agonies of Passiontide, Holy Week and Good Friday. By immersing ourselves in the suffering, we become spiritually prepared to know and appreciate the fullness of the glory of the resurrection.

And because Lent is a microcosm of the Christian life, it allows us to see, and reflect upon, themes set out over a number of weeks, the patterns of which are there but perhaps less easy to discern over the decades of our lived experience. Jesus says those who lose their life will save it. And this is a truism of human psychology. Good comes out of bad. The energy of trauma can be transformed and redirected into an

agent to address the injustice which caused the trauma.

I don't know whether you can think of examples. I certainly can from people I've come across over the years. The person who devotes much of his spare time doing things like running marathons to raise funds for the hospice which supported his wife as she was dying a tragically premature death from cancer. The couple who have set up a bespoke charity to fund research into the rare disease their daughter died from in her early twenties. The couple whose daughter died of cancer in her teens and who found, as is so often the case with adolescents, that she had fallen between the two stools of children's care and adult care, and who now run a charity providing specifically targeted care for teenage cancer sufferers.

Each of these examples is an example of someone embracing their pain and repurposing it to transform their situation for good. In Jesus, God, by being

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

enfleshed, took upon himself the suffering of the world; he walked straight towards betrayal and suffering and crucifixion; and through the power of the spirit of his love he transformed that shame and agony to conquer the powers of darkness and death. The invitation to those who would follow him is not to seek out suffering in a stupid masochistic way, but to embrace the suffering in our lives, in the lives of those around us and in our community; to appropriate the power of the Holy Spirit which comes with the resurrection of Jesus; and to transform our own lives and others and the communities in which we live.

So there we have the bare bones of a Lenten sermon on Mark 8 which could be fleshed out and waxed upon with lyricism and vim. But the niggling question remains of why on earth it was paired up with the story of Abram and Sarai being promised a child in their old age. Well, the answer lies in Romans chapter 4. At the Priory we either have an Old Testament reading and a Gospel reading OR a New Testament

reading and a Gospel reading. But if we wanted we *could* have an Old Testament *and* a New Testament reading as well as the Gospel.

The New Testament reading we would have heard today is from Romans 4, one of those passages in which Paul deploys tortuous barrack-room lawyer like arguments from which Protestant Reformers developed the doctrine of Justification by Faith. Abraham was counted righteous by God because he had *faith* in God's promise of a son even though that was plainly ludicrous given Sarah's age; and therefore it is by faith, and by faith alone, that we are justified with God through Jesus.

And I suppose this is paired up with Mark 8 to encourage the preacher to grasp the hoary chestnut and consider whether it is indeed by faith we are justified; or whether we are justified with God by taking up our cross and sacrificing ourselves to good works, like running a marathon for charity or volunteering at the local food bank. And, of course,

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

the preacher would attempt to square the circle by pointing out that no work is truly good work if it is motivated by the cynical hope of securing a ticket for the pearly gates; and similarly no faith is genuine unless the natural product of it is a commitment to serving others.

But, the preacher would only be prepared to wrestle with that hoary chestnut if their theology were predicated upon an assumption that there has to be some sort of transaction;; that there has to be something offered to attract God's redemption; that either good works or faith (or a complementary combination of the two) has to be inserted in the slot machine of salvation before the handle is pulled and eternal life is scooped out of the tray at the bottom.

But, what if the real scandal of the cross is that Jesus' gift of life to us is absolutely free?

Amen.