

The Old Testament reading today encourages us to think about covenants. On a superficial reading, covenants seem a good choice for Lent because they remind us about obligations, about promises made between two parties, about duty; but Lent is also a time for perfecting our discipleship. This week we have two stories that depict the struggle that this may involve. Genesis tells a story of a man whose faith wobbled as he tried to hold his situation in creative tension with the promise of God. Whilst Mark recounts how Jesus upset the disciples' beliefs as soon as they recognised him as the Messiah.

God's covenant with Abraham comes as a series of steps, all of them leading Abraham into a deeper and deeper exploration of the trustworthiness of God. And, of course, he can only test God's trustworthiness by trusting. By the time we come to chapter 17, Abraham had already left his homeland and been through a great many changes, following God's command, and so far he has more reason to trust than to distrust. He is alive, well and prosperous. But the thing that set Abraham off on this great adventure was actually not a desire for God, or even wealth, but a longing for a son. And although God has been hinting at this all along, he has yet to deliver on this promise. In fact, by chapter 16 Abraham and Sarah have decided to take matter into their own hands, and bypass God. How many times do we grow impatient with God's timing and take matters into our own hands with sometimes disastrous results?

Abraham had a son through his wife's slave – a not uncommon way of doing things in those days. He appeared to think that that was it: God had blessed him, as promised, with a son. But, disconcertingly, God appeared again, and renewed the promise, reiterating that his elderly wife would become the mother of the promised child. Abraham had to trust all over again. Like him we never outgrow this challenge. Abraham had to believe and act on this promise.

The covenant in chapter 17 marks a new phase, which is symbolised by a change of name for both Abraham and Sarah. The journey so far has led them a long way into trusting God, but now they are to see that God is to be trusted beyond their wildest dreams. Abraham and Sarah are to have the child that they long for, but they are also to be 'ancestors of a multitude of nations' in a way that they could never have anticipated. Paul spells it out for us – God's promise to Abraham is a promise to us all.

Lent is a good time for taking small steps in trusting God and these steps are not about making ourselves feel better and holier, but about allowing ourselves to explore the trustworthiness of God. But the reading from Mark sounds a much

needed sombre note. We will only find God trustworthy if we want what God is offering. Abraham could trust because he wanted a son more than comfort or safety. Jesus' challenge to his disciples throughout the ages is the same. God's promise to the followers of Jesus is that they, like Abraham, will have the chance to be parents to millions, bringing them into the family and the life of God, when they share the Good News of the Gospel. But if we are honest that is not our deepest desire. Peter speaks for many of us when he rebukes Jesus's interpretation of God's promise. But he got another chance to learn to trust God for what he is actually promising.

The second half of Mark's Gospel changes focus to the suffering and death of the Messiah, an unimaginable scandal that culminated not in a confession of faith, but in frightened people running from an empty tomb. In today's terms, the leader went off-message, in public, and his press office had to act to stop him before he ruined his reputation. So Peter took Jesus to one side to talk some sense into him, apparently with the collusion of the rest of the disciples, since Jesus looked at all of them before silencing their spokesman. I wonder what was in his eyes at that moment. We may sympathise with the disciples who, in their love for Jesus, wanted to stop him making a seemingly disastrous mistake. It is easier for us, with the benefit of hindsight, but they had to enter uncharted territory, let go of all that they had understood of God's ways, and turn again in commitment in faith.

Lent is a time for the renewal of our commitment to God when faith is tested, stretched, or in danger of faltering. Peter and the disciples were challenged to think the unthinkable – that God's Messiah would suffer – and still remain faithful. Abraham's faith was put under pressure because he could not conceive the greatness of God's promises, and was content to settle for a compromise. Lent is a good time to refocus our gaze on faith's far horizon, not its short-term view. In doing this, we follow Jesus, as Hebrews 12 verse 2 tells us, the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

God gave us life to spend and not to keep for ourselves. If we live carefully, always thinking first of our own profit, ease, comfort and security... if our sole aim is to make life as long and trouble-free as possible... if we make no effort except for ourselves, we will lose our life. But if we spend our life for others... if we forget about our health, our wealth, our time and comfort in a sincere

longing to spend our life for God and for our neighbour... then we are making a mark for eternity. There is nothing less than our very souls at stake here.

The question that each one of us has to answer before God is: Whose values are we representing? God's or our own? Whose agenda are we following in our lives? What matters most to us?

The Lenten season is a time in which we are all encouraged to evaluate our lives in light of God's reconciling love for us. Jesus Christ spent his life that we might live. God's intervention in our lives requires a response from each of us. We must consider what God has done for us. We must also consider the cost of discipleship. And we must decide.

Hebrews 3 verses 7 and 8 says, 'Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts'. Consider what Christ has done for you and give your life to him. Use this journey through Lent towards the Cross to reflect on what God's plan for you might be and pray for courage and grace to walk in his paths. In Jesus' name. Amen.