

16 March 2025 Lent 2

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Readings: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35.

KIA ORA KIWI

One theme that fits our readings today is, God's grace and our need for grace.

Our first readings was the Story of God's covenant with Abraham, who was then called 'Abram'. God promised that Abram – old as he was - would be the progenitor of a family that would outnumber the stars. The second part of God's covenant was that Abram's descendants would be given a land of their own between the two great rivers - the Nile and the Euphrates.

To Abram, it must have seemed like an impossible promise. Not only was he old, his wife Sarai was past the normal child-bearing age.

But Abram dared to believe that the impossible promise would come true.

The covenant was sealed with the sacrifice of a heifer, two goats and several birds. What seems to us a primitive ritual.

Genesis tells us that:

'As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him'.

Why 'terrifying'? We can only guess. The dread and awe that accompanies a meeting with the holy. Samuel felt it. Moses felt it . Peter in the gospels felt it. Paul on the road to Damascus felt it.

Perhaps you have felt it as you have looked up at the stars as Abram did.

In his sleep, Abram dreamed that a flame passed between the severed parts of his animal sacrifice.

What the story is telling us is firstly, that nothing is impossible to God and secondly, that because Abram believed God's impossible promise, Abram's faith was counted to him as 'righteousness'.

This last point about Abram's faith being counted as righteousness, became the touchstone of St Paul's theology of grace – and a pillar of Protestant theology that believes that we are 'saved' by faith alone and not because of any good that we may do.

Abram did nothing to earn God's favour, except to believe in God's promises to him. And his faith was counted to him as righteousness.

A very difficult thing to do, I imagine – especially when the promises were made through a vision.

How many of us have had dreams and visions and not taken them seriously? How much store do we sensible Presbyterians place in visions?

Judging by the history of our church – a lot of store has been given to visions.

When the first Presbyterians arrived in Aotearoa NZ, they were full of what Alan Davidson called, 'Pious energy'. They set about caring for the poor, the beginnings of Presbyterian Support. They set up the first University in Aotearoa NZ and they envisaged a kind of caring society based on Christian principles. In the mid-20th century, a former Presbyterian minister, Arnold Nordmeyer, was instrumental in setting up a Welfare system where NZers could be cared for from the cradle to the grave.

This church, the oldest church in Havelock North, is a result of Christian people wanting a place of worship. St Columba's HN was the first eco-church in NZ – forming the first environmental group, SCHNEG, and cleaning up the Karamu Stream 'between the bridges'.

The Story of the nomadic, wandering, dreaming Abram has also become part of our (Christian) Story.

We live each day, trusting, hoping, wandering, dreaming, not knowing how our lives will end – but we have enough faith to believe that wherever we end up – God will be there.

'The just shall live by faith' (Habakuk 2: 4).

God is our destination. God is our Promised Land.

We go forward in faith – believing in God's promise that God will be with us always in life and in death.

Our second reading is about identity and our citizenship in the kingdom of heaven.

'But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ'.

As NZ citizens we may travel to lots of foreign countries with different customs and values, but we will always be NZ citizens. We have a kiwi passport to prove it.

And where-ever we travel, we rely on the distant support of the NZ government. During the COVID emergency, hundreds of Kiwis were trapped overseas and the first thing they

did was to reach out to the NZ Embassies. We trust that our government will be watching out for us – even from a distance.

Wherever we go, people can detect by our accents and our interest in rugby or netball and cricket, that we are Kiwis. The discerning foreigners can tell the difference between an Australian and a Kiwi.

I probably shouldn't say this, but there's a joke goes: 'What do you call a sophisticated Aussie? Answer: 'A Kiwi'.

I've resisted telling Aussie jokes since one of my sons married a lovely Australian girl over 10 years ago. They have three lovely Kiwi-Aussie-Samoan kids.

In 2002 I was fortunate enough to be one of the NZ Chaplains to a NZ Army Battalion serving East Timor. We were there on peace keeping duties under the UN.

It was interesting to make our first excursions into that mountainous country, and to hear small children calling out to our Kiwi marked military vehicles.

'Kia ora Kiwi!'

The reply for us was 'Bon Dia' – Portuguese for 'Good day'.

The Timorese had learned some phrases from Kiwis soldiers who had been to Timor before us. I was quite proud to be a Kiwi, when I saw the rapport that previous battalions had struck up with locals and I felt the respect the locals had for us Kiwis.

Why did they respect the Kiwi service men and service women? I believe it was because of the Kiwi values. We were down-to-earth. We respected their customs and were non-judgemental. We were friendly and non-authoritarian. We shared our water and some resources with them. We rebuilt the schools and hospitals damaged in their recent civil war.

St Paul wrote to the Philippian Church reminding them of their citizenship. It was first a citizenship in the kingdom of heaven. Their values must be drawn from the teachings of Christ and from the Spirit of Christ.

Biblical Scholar and former Anglican Bishop described the church as, 'a colony of heaven'. If the good Bishop lived in one of Britain's former colonies, he might not use that word, 'colony' but we get what he meant by that. We are a community which draws its life and values from the life and teachings of Jesus.

Paul was very scathing of Christians in Phillipi who were very worldly and in fact enemies of the cross.

“For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ...their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ”.

‘Stand firm in the Lord’ says Paul. Don’t be converted by the world around you. Your first citizenship is in heaven.

Our gospel reading for today represents a major turning point in Jesus’ life.

Up until now, Luke’s gospel has taken us through the slow emergence of Jesus as Messiah.

Biblical scholar Dr Colin Hunter compares the gospel of Luke to a Trilogy like Lord of The Rings.

The first part of Lukes gospel/trilogy is an episode about Jesus’ origins and the location of his early life in history and place and theology.

The second ‘episode’ is about Jesus’ ministry in Galilee where he is portrayed as the itinerant preacher and healer who is revealed as the Messiah promised by the prophets.

The third and final episode begins in today’s lectionary reading, where Jesus begins his fateful journey to Jerusalem and to the cross. The dark clouds of opposition have begun to gather.

Up until now, the forces that would eventually claim Jesus’ life have been dormant – but they are now becoming more overt and confrontational.

In today’s gospel reading, a friendly group of Pharisees (and there were friendly pharisees) warn Jesus that Herod intends to kill him.

They advise Jesus to stay away from Jerusalem, but Jesus is not listening. He is determined to go to Jerusalem.

He feels confident enough to reply to the Pharisees:

‘Go and tell that fox for me, “Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. ³³Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem.”

In the season of Lent, we follow Jesus on that fateful journey to Jerusalem.

After his reply to Herod, Jesus expresses himself using a very feminine analogy.

³⁴Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!’

The image is of a protective mother hen keeping her vulnerable brood safe from the evils of the world.

Over the next few weeks, we continue to journey with Jesus towards Jerusalem. We will see the forces of darkness gathering against him.

The same forces that seek to destroy goodness in every generation including our own generation.

PRAYER

O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you: Mercifully accept our prayers, and because in our weakness we can do nothing good without you, give us the help of your grace, that in keeping your commandments we may please you both in will and deed, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.