

9 August 2013, Sarah Thomas

Genesis 15:1-6 and Luke 12:32-40

Last month, for the first time in three years, I was able to luxuriate in the pleasure of sitting outdoors late into the evening, lighting and relighting citronella candles that kept going out the light breeze. Some nights I caught up with emails and watched TV on the laptop, with only the light of the screen to see by. Other nights I read until it was too dark to see and then I just sat on, rejoicing in the warmth, the sounds of night – the occasional siren, the late birds, I discovered that there is peak in bird song just before dark, and barking foxes. But you know, apart from the moon, which was bright those nights, I saw few stars. It's hard in Bristol to imagine what Abram might have seen when God invited him to look at the stars and try to count his descendants.

I had a glimpse of that though yesterday in broad day light. I had walked from my house to Blaise. I had entered the woods by Henbury Golf Course. The sun was shining and the sky was still blue. I was walking through the beech trees and I looked up into the canopy above me. I love the way that sunlight shines through beech leaves – picking them out in pale green. I was struck by the fact that I couldn't begin to count just how many leaves there were on one tree let alone the whole wood full. I'd been thinking about this morning's Bible readings as I had walked, not sure how to approach them and suddenly I had some inkling of the promise that Abram had received from God. And then I mused on the fact that the stars we see from earth actually are history – they have flared and burned many light years away. The leaves I was seeing are the present. They are a mark of God's creation and a mark that he is with us today as much as he was with Abram so many years ago. A mark in a way of God's continuing provision.

I wonder how many of you noticed that our readings both start with 'do not be afraid'. God says this to Abram and Jesus says it to his disciples. Those of us who love God, who follow Jesus are invited to put aside our fears and to trust God. It's not a blind trust, no, God encourages and listens to Abram's misgivings. We should be honest with God about our fears and anxieties. I've been struck when watching this present series of 'Who do you think you are?' that so much of people's lives are driven by anxiety. In previous generations that was marked by the fear of destitution. In our generation so often we are driven almost by anxiety itself, a nameless worrying about being worried. I see it at work so often, people worried about whether the goals they set themselves, or are set for them, are capable of being achieved and worrying what might happen when, if, things go wrong. Often set backs seem like disasters when they are simply set backs. I know that I fear rejection, something that has, in fact, very rarely happened to me. The fear is far worse than the actuality. For on the rare times when it has happened, so often it actually opens a door to something better. Jesus is much more matter of fact about worry than we ever are. Don't be afraid, be ready.

If we are not afraid then I believe we are better able to trust. Able to trust God and one another. That then opens up opportunities to receive God's love and power, often through the love and service of others.

When Luke records Jesus as recommending that we do not store up treasure on earth, I think he is referring to the things that get in the way of us experiencing that love. If we invest all our attention on the next new best thing – kitchen, car, TV etc, then we lose focus on the things that really do matter.

Instead, we can and should store up treasures of love and hold onto them loosely. What are the marks of treasures of love? I think it's how we build relationships. How we love our families, our friends and those we never meet. That is our earthly treasure. I'm often struck when at funerals and thanksgivings, of the depth of love that those being remembered have given to their families and

friends. And how that has encouraged those who received that love, to pass it on to others, to share the gift of grace that they have been given.

Those relationships are also marks of the Kingdom of God. Luke tells us that it is our Father's pleasure to give us the kingdom. The Kingdom is as much available here and now as it is some distant hope for our future. God asks us to be instruments of bringing his kingdom to this earth.

A few years ago at a Weekend Away I used this piece of liturgy from Iona¹. I find it helpful when reflecting on the treasures that I have received from others and how I might learn to be less afraid and to see where God's kingdom is, here today.

Reflections on the Kingdom of God.

What is the Kingdom of God? I've asked many people what the kingdom of God is for them, and here are some of the answers:

The presence of Christ in our lives.

Heaven.

All that we receive and know, and all that we don't understand.

Where the rich recognise the poor.

Where we are all one

Reconciliation

Within me

People

Everyone here

The rule of God expressed through his people

Heaven in us

A fair world for all here on earth

Our divine potential

Where we return to when we die

A place where I can be free and be loved

Living with Jesus

Our recognition of Christ's love here on earth

When really good things happen right here and now and you don't know how it happened

A place where all people and all creation are together in peace, love and harmony and in the complete presence of God

Living now as if now is heaven....

¹ Anika Schultz from Barefeet and Buttercups, Resources for Ordinary Time. Wild Goose Publications 2008

I believe that we all have different ideas about what the kingdom of God means to us. And I think that sometimes, if we pay attention, we might be able to see some glimpses of it:

In the laughter of a child

Soft warm light on a summer evening

The touch of someone you love

Justice being done

Powerful thunderstorms

A great day at the beach

The breaking down of walls and barriers between families and nations

Brightly coloured flowers

The smile of a friend

Sitting round a fire

Singing birds

Shared stories

Not only can we see the kingdom, we can make it happen in the world around us, maybe only in little steps, but we can do it. We can do it by caring, by enjoying life, by being fair to each other, by smiling at those around us, by challenging each other, by trying to see each other with the love that God feels for each of us.

We can try to make the little world directly around us a bit lighter, more colourful, more loving and peaceful than it is.

So let's go,

Let's do it

And let's do it now,

Without waiting for tomorrow

As Jesus said: 'Go announce the kingdom of God'

Amen