

Sunday 12 March 2017 Genesis 12:1-4a and John 3:1-17

God's blessings.

You know sometimes I think the best part of the service is the end. Maybe not for the reasons you may be thinking, but because of the bit where whoever is leading the service, will directly speak of God's blessing. Of course, much of the rest of the service points towards God's innumerable blessings, but the very words 'and the blessing of God almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be among you now and always' serve to send us out from the time we dedicate to communal worship of God, clothed if you like, with the armour of God ready to deal with whatever the world has to throw at us.

Blessing can mean God's favour or protection. It can mean opening the door into wholeness. It can also be something which we share with each other. Such a blessing is something different from a greeting, a hug, a salute or an affirmation, it's a different type of human encounter as it opens a door into sharing God's wholeness. To be blessed or to be a blessing to others is a wonderful gift from God.

Abram is called by God to a new beginning. He is told to leave his country, his family, and his father's home for the land that God will give him. The price of obedience is to go off into the wilderness without a map of any sort. Abram will never have a settled home again. He is asked to make a break with his past in order to be able to be open to God's truth. For fellowship between God and Humankind was, is, part of God's original intention. It's not something that is reserved for the mystically inclined.

Similarly, Jesus told the disciples to leave their nets and follow him. None of them knew what or where that would lead to.

God promised Abram that he will become the father of a great nation, that he will be blessed and will himself be a blessing. Abram's life was guided by the desire to serve and please God. Faith, obedience, courage and patience were the pattern by which he tried to live. Through him grew the Hebrew nation, the people whom God set apart for himself. What mattered to them was being a child of Abraham, being born into the right family. It protected them. Through it they receive God's blessing.

And that's how it was centuries later, when Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a respected and senior teacher, came to ask Jesus some questions. He wasn't just a random observer of Jesus. He specialised in knowing the law that God had given Moses and had been developed through the Torah, he led worship, and served as a spiritual guide. He can be seen as not just representing himself, but also representing the institutional side of Judaism.

There are a number of ways to interpret his visit 'by night'. It could simply be that it was quieter then, fewer people trying to crowd around Jesus. Or maybe, he could have been wary about being seen with Jesus. It could represent the way we all ask questions during periods of darkness, both literally at night or at times of great upheaval. Sometimes the deepest things we ask or are afraid of only really surface under cover of darkness. Or maybe, 'by night' is even a way of describing how spiritually blind he was, that he lived in darkness, when Jesus was offering light. Or even that he represents the darkness, a darkness

that seeks to destroy those who respond to God's light. It could be that this encounter pitches dark against light. Nicodemus was humbling himself by coming. He shows a strange mix of curiosity, courage, timidity and lack of understanding. He is mentioned three times in John's gospel, here, later when the Pharisees want Jesus to be arrested he speaks up for Jesus and later still he is with Joseph of Aramathea when Jesus is put into his tomb, bringing myrrh and aloes.

And Jesus spars with him. For Jesus is interested in the relationship Nicodemus has with God. Nicodemus knows that he belongs within the chosen people of God. He is part of the nation that God promised to Abram and that he promised to bless.

Jesus tells him that is no longer enough. It doesn't matter who your family is. he tells him that God loves the world, not just Abram's family. That Jesus has come to bring God's light into all the world, to save all the world. For 'the world' means humanity. Jesus has come to extend the blessing that God promised Abram. To bless everyone. To transform the lives of those who confess his name. To take us, and in the words of a chorus from my youth, to break us, melt us and mould us.

What matters is your relationship with God. Fidelity to religious traditions may or may not make us nicer people, but it isn't what counts. It's possible to get the theology right but the relationship with God wrong. Religious knowledge can become a shield with which we protect ourselves from the God we claim to know. It can place us in darkness. But you know, Jesus comes into our darkness. He brings the light with him. Through the water of baptism and the fire and wind of the Holy Spirit, we are born again. God's spirit overwhelms, transforms and converts. But we can't rely on the fact of our conversion. We must remain alert to see that we remain linked to the spiritually unpredictable Holy Spirit. For while our relationship with God may seem to be vertical, God works horizontally too, he works on all planes and dimensions, through his Holy Spirit, linking us with each other here, and throughout the world.

Rowan Williams says that being a disciple of Christ, we should expect to be attentive, to be still, to expect to grow and we should expect joy. And I read 'joy' to be one facet of blessing and it can be a very unruly thing. It can be found in kindness, it can be found in the beauty of those to commit themselves to pray faithfully for us, without us ever knowing about it. And it comes in the great blessing of friendship, and in the blessing of strangers. For our friends were strangers once.

The season of Lent is often seen as an individual thing, a time when we turn inward, when we reflect on how we each respond to God's calling on our lives, hoping to find ourselves transformed as a result. And yet, shouldn't we also be looking to transform our relationships with one another, for God is in those relationships too. Perhaps we can practice hospitality, welcome strangers, listen more closely to those we find difficult and those we disagree with. As we look for blessing on our lives, so we should look too for blessings on our community, our communal life as worshippers together at St Peters and long to be part of the giving and experiencing of blessing.

