

## Sermon 28<sup>th</sup> February: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 and Mark 8:31-end

You may or may not believe this, but I was very nearly a princess. When I was born my parents had narrowed down my name choice to two, either Emma or Charlotte. Obviously they went for Emma, but if they had chosen Charlotte I would have been Charlotte Elizabeth born on the second of May, which is exactly the same as William and Kate's daughter, Princess Charlotte.

Many girls will have been named after Princess Charlotte but in our Old Testament reading today, we hear an example of predictive name giving. God tells Abram that he is going to make a covenant with him that he will be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. Therefore, his name will no longer be Abram, which means exalted ancestor, but Abraham, meaning ancestor of a multitude. Whilst our reading goes on to include Sarah's renaming from Sarai to Sarah, it stops short of finding out Abraham's reaction to God's covenant and name changing activity. So, let me read the next verse to you, it says this: Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?"

Spoiler alert, as it turns out, with God they can. But it's not necessarily surprising that Abraham had his doubts because by all human measures and expectations, it would have been impossible. Abraham was thinking in human terms, not in God's terms.

Peter, in our gospel reading, shares some similarities with Abraham. Like Abraham, he has had his name changed in anticipation of something God knows he will do, and is in fact part of who he is – Simon, you shall be called Peter, for on this rock I will build my church. And like Abraham, he is also thinking in human terms when he takes Jesus aside and tells him the whole suffering and dying thing

that Jesus has been teaching is not what is meant to happen to a Messiah.

Peter had been doing pretty well at understanding who Jesus was, he had declared him as the Messiah before any of the other disciples had twigged, or at least felt brave enough to say it out loud. But the problem was, the Messiah that Peter wanted was very different from the picture that Jesus was now painting of what would happen to him.

Part of me always feels a little sorry for Peter, to be told by Jesus 'get behind me Satan!' seems pretty harsh and extreme. But for Jesus there must have been parallels with his time in the wilderness, that we heard about in our service last week. Someone, in this case well-meaning, telling him it didn't have to be this way, that he had power and authority to make things easier for himself. A tempting suggestion. But Jesus knows what he has to do, he knows what the will of the Father is.

He tells Peter 'you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things,' and so often the human mindset is drastically different to the divine mindset. What the world tells us of success, power, even happiness, is so often not what God says of those things.

So, what does this mean for us? Well first it's worth taking a moment to ponder what setting our mind on human things might look like. Perhaps it's being bound by what the world says is important, for Abraham and Sarah it was getting caught up in what the world says is possible, perhaps for you and I, it may be believing what the world tells us we should want in life, what success looks like, how wealth makes your life better or how our rights as individuals should take precedence over everyone else.

But when we set our mind on divine things, we discover that whilst earthly success and wealth is fleeting, investing in our relationship

with God brings true happiness and eternal life, and that our rights as individuals only isolate us when we do not also have the rights of our neighbours as a priority. So how do we do it? How do we change our mindset from human to divine things?

For Abraham, the change came as he heard and obeyed God. Perhaps he still had doubts, perhaps the laughing continued on the inside and he felt embarrassed as he told his oldest friends that his name was now Abraham. But he still obeyed. For us, hearing and obeying God might seem crazy by the world's standards, following Jesus' teaching on turning the other cheek and loving our enemies is not really in line with what the world encourages us to do. For Peter, turning his mind onto divine things meant letting go of what he had hoped for, for so long and accepting a victory that looked more like failure. Perhaps for us it will be allowing God to take us into wilderness places, as Mark was talking about last week, where we will need to trust that God is with us and that he knows what he is doing.

My prayer for us this Lent is that we may rise to the challenge of shifting more of our focus onto God, knowing that even the world's greatest joys pale into insignificance compared to Easter Sunday morning.

Amen