

Sermon for Trinity 11 (C) – St James' Church, Cambridge
The Revd Debbie Ford – 11. 8.13

Lectionary Texts: Genesis 15:1-6
Psalm 33:12-21/end
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
Luke 12: 32-40

- Today's readings are all about one of the central issues in the split in the Western Church during the 15th Century: the Reformation. The Church in East and West had already divided over Rome and Papal authority- but this was a pivotal time in *Western* Christendom, when the Church divided into Catholic and Protestant.
- Of course the split was about more than this, too, but Luther's taking a stance on what is known as 'justification by faith' was a key thing. I remember learning all about it at school once, but to be honest it was all so abstract and theoretical (and boring) that I hardly remember a thing.
- But it was probably the deepest split there has ever been in the Church and one that has led to some of the most terrible persecution, hatred, and blood loss on both sides: from the Peasants' War (in Luther's day) through the Thirty Years' War, (which claimed the lives of a larger percentage of the population of many parts of central Europe than any other war in history), including the two world wars, and is still the source of so much tension in Northern Ireland.
- We need to learn from it: so how do we recognize it as part of our story? Just as alive and relevant for us now as it was for people then?
- One of the dividing issues was over whether we believe that we're saved by the good 'deeds' we do (the 'works') or by faith in God. And for Luther, of course, it was faith – and faith alone: he was fed up with all the ways the Catholics were trying to 'earn' their way into heaven.
- But perhaps it is a false/unnecessary split...Right from the beginning, the Bible is full of stories and lessons about how difficult it is for us human beings *not* to gradually distort and

unbalance the created order of things – letting *ourselves* and what *we* do become more important than remembering to give *God* the credit for it all (and the endless ways we try to justify and glorify ourselves can be a very subtle).

- So what if it's not a matter of either/or ('faith' or 'works') but having faith and trust in God *as well as* being responsible in the way we live our lives: they go hand in hand.
- Both are certainly advocated in the scriptures – and you can certainly find over-emphasis on works rather than faith amongst Protestants (or vice-versa) just as much as you can in Catholicism. And we tend to have those parts and tendencies within ourselves, too: the 'Martha' parts and the 'Mary' parts.
- So whatever we want to call ourselves, perhaps the important thing is how we keep the right *balance* and remember the amazing fact that it is *God* who's at the heart of all we are and do.
- Whether we acknowledge it or not, our lives are utterly bound up in God. Remember how Jesus prays for his disciples before he dies? "As you, Father, are in me and I in you, may they also be in us..." (John 17:21)
- He is in us and we are in him: it's his breath of life and Spirit in us that enables us to do anything: he's the source of it all – it's *completely* God's initiative... and anything we do in response is through God's life and energy *in* us: bubbling up again and again - stronger than all that resists it.
- In a society that values autonomy and individualism so highly, it's quite 'alternative,' isn't it? And the gospel reading follows on directly from the passage last week, where Jesus warned us not to get so caught up in material and superficial things that we miss what life is really about.
- It's not that those things can't be good in themselves – very good, often, but there's something even *more* precious to be discovered.
- Often it's the things and people that are most precious to us that cause the most worry, isn't it? Whether it's fear of loss or separation, or children coming home safely or finding a job.... Or

of losing our health and/or independence as we get older... or fear of getting dementia – or having our homes repossessed.

- But the refrain in today’s readings – both to Abram (who’s in the middle of a family crisis) *and* to those Jesus is addressing in Luke is: ***‘Do not be afraid....’***
- I meet people who are full of fear and anxiety on a daily basis.... And there *are* things to *be* afraid of in life: *real* things - which politicians and the media try to *cultivate* and *capitalise* on - whether it’s the EU, or immigration, or Al Qaeda, or Nuclear Arms, or the insecurity of the Market, or pensions, or illness and death.... Fear stops compassion, generosity and alertness – because when we’re caught up in it, we are distracted and lose perspective. According to the Daily Mail some months ago “ The credit crunch has added half an hour to the time we spend worrying each day. The average Briton wastes 2 hours and fifteen minutes each day fretting – which over a lifetime adds up to an average of six years and six months.”
- So what does it mean “Don’t be afraid..”? And how do we get the right balance between trusting and being confident in God without becoming complacent or over-confident?
- I was talking to a colleague at work the other day and she said “I *know* I’m saved: I *know* I’m going to heaven because of what Jesus did on the cross.”
- I don’t think I could quite say that for myself: although I do believe that *ultimately* God will be true to his/her promises.
- I think I’d be more like Westcott (a former Regius Professor of Divinity in Cambridge and founder of Westcott House Theological College), who, when asked once: “Are you saved?” replied: “ I have been saved, I am being saved and I trust I *will* be saved....”
- God’s future in the ‘bigger scheme of things’ means that things are always open and we need to constantly stay open and on the alert (“dressed for action and lamps lit” as Jesus puts it): God is a God of surprises and *God* is the one who has the last word, not us. “Be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour...” (Luke 12:40)

- This is the God who says to Moses: ‘I am who I am and I shall be who I shall be... But he also says ‘I shall be *with* you.’ (Ex 3: 12, 14)
- It *doesn't* mean difficult and sometimes even terrible things wont happen in this life– God’s kingdom is still in the painstaking process of being fulfilled (that’s the work of the Spirit in us groaning with prayers and sighs too deep for words), but God says ‘Let *me* help/be with you... *Trust* me: if you let me be *in* whatever’s troubling you with you, it will make all the difference. Give *me* the power, rather than the fear.’

**“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
Because you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I
love you.... (Isaiah 43:2, 4)**

- I remember being deeply moved when I had the chance to go round the Martin Luther King Museum in Atlanta a few years ago and to learn more about the civil rights movement and what it had cost the black community in the South during the 1960s.
- There was one story I remember particularly vividly.
- It was shortly after Rosa Parks had begun the campaign to stop going along with bus segregation and refused to go and sit in the ‘black section’ at the back – and the clamp down from the authorities was getting harsher and harsher. People were terrified as they tried to keep standing up for their rights without retaliating or becoming violent...(like Jesus through his arrest and trial).
- Martin Luther King called everyone together and said: “As long as they can see we’re afraid they’ll have power over us....But if we’re not afraid, what power do they have? And what are we afraid of anyway? Whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.... To him be the glory.”
- They were delivered from fear because with and in God, and with one another, they had faced the very worst that could be done to them: hosings, beatings, humiliation, separation and loss from being with loved ones - whether through imprisonment or even

death. And of course it made all the difference. Whatever the authorities did to try and stop them, it didn't work – even though (soon afterwards) it cost Luther King his life.

- That's what we're being invited into, here, too: being delivered from our fears through facing them with and in God -discovering with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob what it is to live life with someone who *delights* in giving us the kingdom and wants us to share in *all* that he gives as King anticipating and recognizing the signs of it in our midst.
- And whether we 'feel' it not, what we *can* be confident in is the reality of a God who is utterly merciful and compassionate and *will* fulfill all that he has promised.
- As St Augustine once said (and he had a mother who doted on him, so it was saying quite a lot!): "I'd rather be judged by God than by my own mother..."
- So as we prepare to share Communion together, let's offer ourselves afresh to the God who says 'Do not be afraid' as we pray with the psalmist:

**“Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and shield.
Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name.
Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us even as we hope in you.” (Psalm 33:20-22)**

Amen.

Genesis 15:1-6 ‘God’s Covenant with Abram’

15 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.’² But Abram said, ‘O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?’ And Abram said, ‘You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.’⁴ But the word of the LORD came to him, ‘This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.’⁵ He brought him outside and said, ‘Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’⁶ And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Psalms 33:12-21/end

¹² Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD,
the people whom he has chosen as his heritage.

¹³ The LORD looks down from heaven;
he sees all humankind.

¹⁴ From where he sits enthroned he watches
all the inhabitants of the earth—

¹⁵ he who fashions the hearts of them all,
and observes all their deeds.

¹⁶ A king is not saved by his great army;
a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.

¹⁷ The war horse is a vain hope for victory,
and by its great might it cannot save.

¹⁸ Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,
on those who hope in his steadfast love,

¹⁹ to deliver their soul from death,
and to keep them alive in famine.

²⁰ Our soul waits for the LORD;
he is our help and shield.

- ²¹ Our heart is glad in him,
because we trust in his holy name.
- ²² Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us,
even as we hope in you.

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ³By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible....

The Faith of Abraham

...⁸ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. ¹²Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, ‘as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.’

¹³ All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, ¹⁴for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

Luke 12:32-40

³² ‘Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. ³³Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Watchful Slaves

³⁵ ‘Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; ³⁶be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. ³⁷Blessed are

those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. ³⁸If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

39 'But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁰You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.'