

Sunday 13th March 2022, 2nd Sunday in Lent

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13: 31-35

I have to confess that when I first looked at today's readings, I could see nothing whatever to link them together. Subsequent inspections of the texts left me feeling no better, so I've decided to approach this morning from a somewhat different angle – my own and perhaps other people's failure to see.

Many years ago, when our children were very young, I overheard the following conversation between the older two as they played on the grass and earth of our front garden: "How far is it to Granny's house for an ant?" Without missing a beat, the reply came back: "Running or walking?" And somehow inevitably and with the authority of the very young: "Running. It would be further if it was walking."

At a stroke, the constraints of time and space had vanished because time and space mean nothing to small children. Perhaps it is this, in part, that enables children to have such a special sense of wonder. They wonder about things, like the ant's interminable journey, and they wonder at things, like the smallness of the ant and its therefore tiny experiences, and they just gaze in wonder. The more adults are hemmed in by duties and timetables and deadlines the less time there is to wonder about anything. Children see things differently. We know that everybody sees things differently. Witnesses to the same event give a huge range of descriptions: there seems to be no constant, an endless variety within physical experience. Things get very much more complicated when, as Christians, we are also expected to see, or at least glimpse, something of the beyond – the transcendent, the eternal. No two experiences are the same.

Today's readings seem to me to deal with both the physical and the spiritual. Abram had a vision. That's not your common or garden physical experience. And God encouraged him to look at the stars, which of course he could not count for they are beyond number. Gazing at the night sky, a phenomenon of the natural world, can often lead to a numinous experience, can take the most ordinary beholder out of him or her self. The vastness is awesome. Abram was reassured by God that he would indeed be father to a countless race, and his trust in God's word earns God's reckoning it to him "as righteousness", and we remember Abram for his faith. The final part of this particular encounter with God is a deep sleep and a "deep and terrifying darkness", during which God bound himself to his covenant with Abram by means of a smoking pot and a flaming torch, (and I'm very glad my commentary told me that's what God was doing, because I don't think I had worked it out for myself...) Abram has had a deep and profound experience of the eternal, the transcendent, and has shown himself ready to trust God's promise, despite all the evidence to the contrary in his lack of an heir so far and his age. We begin to see that it's out of the "terrifying darkness" that faith and trust can emerge.

St Paul, when writing to the Philippians, gives us one of his many comparisons between the earthly and the heavenly. Any follower of Christ lives in two orders simultaneously, the earthly order under the judgement of the heavenly, right now. We don't have to wait till the end of time. It's happening now if only we have eyes to see. And that's the whole problem. Most of the time we don't, and we're just as blind as the Pharisees, and just as blind as "that fox" Herod who can't see what's going on under his nose. However much Jesus casts out devils and performs cures in this earthly and physical world of time and space, his enemies can't see what any of it means. They are blind to any spiritual dimension, and with that blindness seems to go a blindness towards human need in

others. How can the Pharisees and all Jesus' other critics not see that God would want Jesus to cure and heal those suffering and in pain? How can they create so many religious and ritual barriers between the sick, the poor and the marginalised and the rest of society? And Jerusalem had a long history of blindness to the truth, blindness to the eternal and blindness to compassion. They have stoned and killed the prophets before Jesus and now they will kill him. They are blind to God in their very midst. The Pharisees and Herod are blind, church and state equally blind. Some people simply can't see what is staring them in the face.

Ever since I went on a placement to HMP Grendon 25 or so years ago I have observed a particular blindness in some people. Prisoners at Grendon daily confront what each of them has done in groups of about 12. They can be in denial for ages because they simply cannot see the terrible harm they have done to others. Then, in the therapy, there is a moment when the scales fall from their eyes and they see, really see for the first time what they have done and the harm they have wrought, the pain they have caused. That moment of enlightenment is agony for the offender. They suddenly see what has been obvious to everyone else and they hate themselves. They can't live with themselves. Often, they are at risk of suicide. That has been what has convinced me that some people cannot see their lethally damaging effect on others, until they are confronted by their crime and by people who have suffered at their hands. Until that moment of clarity it's no good saying "treat others as you would like to be treated yourselves" because they simply don't get it. Just as some people are dyslexic and can't see the shapes the letters make, some people can't see their impact on other people, they can't take that step of the imagination and stand in the victim's shoes. It's beyond them. And it was beyond Herod and the Pharisees to see the effects of their actions.

The imagination leads us beyond the here and now. It leads us to further dimensions of seeing and of feeling. We, like the world we inhabit, are both physical and divine. We are made in the image of God. We are shot through with spiritual gifts and insights that can take us to that wonderland of awe and transcendence. But that imagination needs to be nurtured. As children grow up, they gradually lose their sense of wonder; and cynicism, suspicion and doubt creep in unless the imagination is encouraged.

What of us? What do we see? How do we see? Like an ant, with a tiny perspective? Or does even an ant have some glimpse of the vast world of which it is a part? When, if ever, do we experience moments of wonder, moments of epiphany, moments when the transcendent breaks through into our mundane time-bound existence? And what happens when we are afraid? How does fear affect our sight? The world is afraid at the moment, afraid of one unpredictable man with huge power. If someone pours boiling water on an ants' nest, the surviving ants scuttle about in all directions. Order and purpose disappear in the mad rush for survival. It feels as though the world is close to that point of frenzied self-protection as we are threatened with far worse than boiling water. But St Paul reminds us that Christ can transform, even transform our fear to faith. Just across the road from this cathedral church stands the knife angel. I went to pay my respects to him a couple of days ago and found myself quite overwhelmed. The angel towers over us; we are as ants. His whole body is made from the handles of thousands of knives and his wings have feathers of blades. Instruments of violence, injury and all too often death creating something new, and I found, really awe-inspiring. The angel's face and the vulnerability of his outheld hands transform the evil potential into something more than we can imagine. The angel challenges us to see things differently, to see resurrection and new life even in the darkest

and most violent places. How can we bring about new ways of seeing? How can we be instruments of resurrection and new life?

When I read today's gospel and saw how Jesus referred to Herod as "that fox", I immediately thought of Putin now and all the far stronger epithets than "fox" I would like to apply to him. But what good would that do? I might feel temporarily relieved and that's it. But further down the passage is Jesus' lament for Jerusalem, spoken in love despite Jerusalem's murderous nature. Are we, like Jerusalem, blind to God in our very midst? There lies the challenge to us. We must enter into the darkness with Jesus, just as Abram entered into the deep and terrifying darkness with God. Faith, trust, new life and even love, most importantly love can emerge from that darkness. Jesus can transform our fear to faith, our faith to love. Verse 3 of today's psalm reads: "Though an host of men were laid against me, yet shall not my heart be afraid: and though there rose up war against me, yet will I put my trust in him." As is so often the way, the psalms say everything. Psalm 27 could serve as a daily prayer for us all as we journey through this particular Lenten wilderness, including as it does, moments of doubt and fear from verse 8 onwards. An awareness of threat and enemies runs through the whole psalm, but it ends with a plea for patience: "O tarry thou the Lord's leisure: be strong and he shall comfort thine heart; and put thou thy trust in the Lord."

Children can also teach us about trust. Trust demands that denial of self, that denial of the pull towards autonomy and individual assertion. We must trust each other and above all, we must trust God who is with us in the darkness, bound to us as he was to Abram, but now through Jesus our crucified Lord and Saviour. Amen.