

I don't know whether your Christian journey has been or is desired to be one of visions or mystical experiences. There's absolutely nothing wrong with those, nearly all our saints have travelled that way. I have to say that my Christian journey hasn't been particularly one of visions, or audible commands or even exciting signs, it's been a bit of a boring plodding on, taking what I think the next step might be in who God is calling me to be and where God is calling me to be that. So, I have to confess to some romanticism about visions. I'm drawn to the vision of Isaiah and his response, "woe is me, I am a man of unclean lips;" of Peter's vision of the blanket falling from heaven and a divine telling off for calling anything God has made unclean; of Ananias' vision of baptising the worst persecutor of the Church to that point; and of course Mary's response to Gabriel. All of them, and others, had this amazing and definitely terrifying experience and yet responded positively, changing the course of salvation history.

And then there is Abram. We're jumping around a bit in Abraham's biography, today we're back towards the beginning, he is still Abram. God has called him from Ur and he has left all and followed, the primal pilgrim. His nephew Lot has caused a war which Abram has won, and he has been blessed by the

mystical Melchizedek, whose name sends shivers down readers' spines to this day. And then God appears to Abram and says, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." This is what I dream of. I imagine that if God appeared me to here and said that I'd have published a book, recorded a vlog, had a YouTube channel set up and built a shrine with accompanying gift shop and retreat house in no time!

But Abram, Abram does his best Vicky Pollard impression, "yeah but...". '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?"' God has just promised Abram Godself, I will be your shield and very great reward. Abram's response, meh! To be fair to him, everything has gone well for him up to this point. His journey has been good, he has increased his wealth, he has won wars. To be fair he's also lied to Pharoah, let his wife been taken into Pharoah's hareem and has lost the best grazing ground to his nephew. He is on his way to being great. But what is the point of all of that if he doesn't have an heir to pass it on to, if his name dies, the great promise God made back in chapter 12 isn't any closer to happening, in fact it's further away with every day that he and Sarai age. "So, when he stands talking to God under the starry night sky, his

faith is a complex mixture of what has already gone before and what he longs for.”<sup>1</sup>

God interrupts Abram’s worries, his anxieties about being childless with “Do not be afraid.” And to calm Abram’s fears he tells him that his reward will be great. We need to be careful with talk of reward, when we think about God and our faith. Too often it can turn into a quid pro quo, if we do x then God will reward us with y; if we pray hard enough God will heal; if we give up everything we like then God will reward us with our heart’s desire.

Somewhere deep inside us we think we can bargain with or bribe God. Notice God doesn’t ask anything of Abram before God says Abram will be rewarded. “The rewards must be articulated as the generous response of God to those who heed [God’s] call and share [God’s] life. That is what is offered to Abraham in the face of barrenness.”<sup>2</sup>

And what happens, “he believed the Lord.” This is the story that Paul and Martin Luther will build the theology of justification by faith on. Abraham

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<sup>1</sup> Williams, Jane, *Lectionary Reflections Year C*, p.99

<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann, Walter, *Genesis*, p.142

believed yes, but God reckoned it to him as righteousness. All God has done is shown Abram some stars and yet it has changed everything, because now Abram believes the future is possible because of who God is, not who Abram is.

“The text announces afresh what it means to be the human creatures we are created to be, that is, to be righteous. It means to trust God’s future and to live assured of that future even in the deathly present. This discernment of righteousness means the end of every “-ism” ... for every -ism is a way of keeping control of the present. This new righteousness means to relinquish control of the present for the sake of a Genesis.”<sup>3</sup> A new creation.

Our Gospel begins with the same message as that of God to Abram, “Do not be afraid.” It could be argued that this is Luke’s central thesis: Zechariah (1:13), Mary (1:30), the shepherds (2:10), Simon Peter (5:10), Jairus (8:50) and the disciples in general (12:4-7) all get the same message, “do not be afraid.” In all of these instance, as in our gospel reading, “fear is a human response

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<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann, p.147

impeding one's perception of God's will and ways at work in their lives."<sup>4</sup> Like the message of God to Abram, so too is the message of Jesus to us, don't be afraid because it doesn't depend on us, "it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

It is your Father's good pleasure, or God's delightful decision, the divine pleasure that we see at Jesus' birth (2:14), at Jesus' baptism (3:22), at revealing ultimate meanings to infants (10:21).<sup>5</sup> Importantly the Greek verb expressing divine pleasure is in the Aorist tense, indicating complete action in the past. We are not hoping desperately for God's good pleasure to happen it has already happened. The kingdom that God has already given us in God's pleasure is God's active reign over heaven, which according to Luke is what Jesus is now inaugurating on earth in his ministry. "God has delightedly decided to include us in this royal rule so that our identity and activity are totally transformed."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Carlson, Richard, in *Feasting on the Word, Year C volume 3*, p.335

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p.337

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p.337

**Year C**  
**Eighth Sunday After Trinity**  
**Genesis 15:1-6**  
**Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16**  
**Luke 12:32-40**

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So, because of that the disciples can sell, give, make purses that don't wear out, store up heavenly treasure. And not only the disciples but us.

And that's where we falter, isn't it, if we're honest? These are ok stories kept in the deserts of Canaan with old Patriarchs or kept on the hillsides of Palestine with the disciples. But they sound very dangerous ideas in the comfort (pews not withstanding) of Berwick-Upon-Tweed. "There is nothing easy about such waiting in an impatient world. This is especially true when we consider how much of the busyness of parish life is rooted in anxiety and fear about the future. What would happen if we really left the future up to God?"<sup>7</sup> It's especially true when we consider the anxieties of our own lives: pensions, jobs, children, grand-children, isolation; or when we consider the anxieties of our current world order: genocide, the deliberate starving of children, the inability of our international leaders to lead with moral authority, a government apparently devoid of hope, a parliament willing to legislate when death can occur.

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<sup>7</sup> Lull, Patricia J, *Feasting*, p.336

And into all of that God says, “Do not fear,” Jesus says, “Do not be afraid little flock.” And to back it all up along comes the author of Hebrews and says, “now faith ...’ and our instant human reaction is to say, “oh not you as well, shut up!” But she is persistent, so she says, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” And she recaps the history of those gone before us and concludes that “God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.”

We are back to reward, and kingdoms and cities already prepared, already won, already given. Faith is what helps us to hold on to that. “Faith is based in a knowledge of God, but it is fuelled by longing to know God better, and to see more of what our faithful but enthralling God is up to. What we know for sure is that we have not yet got to the end of what God has in store for us.”<sup>8</sup> God is not finished with us, our future is bigger than our past, we are invited to replace our anxiety with excitement, and when that falters, which it will, faith is what helps see the future we can build with God.

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We don't have a starry sky to look up to this morning, but we do have the sacrament, the seal of all God's promises in Jesus Christ. If God can bring life out of death, hope out of hopelessness what can God not do, and who are we that God could not do the same with us and through us. Do not be afraid, whatever anxieties we carried in with us this morning, look up at the altar rail and see the promise of God's future, a promise that includes you because of God's good pleasure.

We might not have the cosy chat with God under a starry sky, we might not see visions or hear the divine voice, but we are told quite clearly that we have been called children of God, reckoned as righteous and heirs of the promise of Abraham. The next move is ours.