

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year C

Second Sunday of Lent

First reading: (Genesis 15.5-12, 17-18)

The Covenant with Abram

There are different stories of exactly how God's pact with Abraham (or Abram) was made. There is no doubt that it was a promise of lasting protection for Abraham and his descendants. This version takes the form of an ancient sacral covenant, of a kind known from other ancient Near Eastern sources. The offerings are cut in half, and the parties making the pact pass between the halves, as a symbol that they will observe the pact faithfully until the two halves come together again.

Such covenants were frequent between equals, or between overlord and vassal, but no such covenant is known between a deity and a human being. It perhaps marks the inequality that only the awesome symbols of God here pass between the halves of the offering: Abraham cannot impose conditions on God!

Neither can Abraham do anything to earn or justify this promise: he can only trust in God, for he himself remains a nomad without a settled territory to call his own. Only his descendants will inherit the land and become as the stars of heaven. The awesome mystery of the scene is increased by the deep sleep (the same sleep as fell on Adam for the creation of Eve) and by Abram's terror.

Question:

What do you need to do to fulfil your part of the bargain with God?

Second reading: (Philippians 3.17-4.1)

Citizenship of Heaven

Last Sunday's second reading moved one step higher from the first reading, from the Israelite profession of faith in God to the Christian's profession of faith in Christ as Risen Lord. So this Sunday, Abram's promised ownership of the land is gazumped to the Christian's citizenship of heaven.

In this world, we are aliens rather than citizens, in that our final values are not those of this world. We cannot rest in contentment, except in the expectation of the Risen Lord coming in triumph to assume lordship of all things. This, rather than food or any material goods, must be the basis of our whole system of values.

To modern conventions, Paul's occasional encouragement to follow his rule of life or to imitate him seems boastful and complacent. He sees himself as the servant of Christ, suffering for Christ, just as Jesus suffered as the Servant of the Lord. Paul's sufferings are the badge of apostleship. In other passages, however, he shows that he is as aware as any of us of his own failings and of his inability to live up to his ideals.

Question:

If you are to live in the world, is it unavoidable to compromise your Christian standards?

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Gospel:

(Luke 9.28-36)

The Transfiguration of Jesus

Each Lent the gospel reading of the second Sunday is the Transfiguration, preparing the chosen three disciples and ourselves for the coming Passion. It is a scene of Christ's heavenly glory, his clothes bright as lightning, and his glory extending even to Moses and Elijah. These two personalities are here privileged to speak to Jesus because each had a vision of God on the Holy Mountain, Sinai or Horeb respectively (in the Old Testament, these are two names for the same mountain).

The Voice from heaven at the baptism had been addressed to Jesus himself (in Mark and Luke); now the Voice is a public declaration of Jesus' Sonship, and authorizes him to all as the Chosen Teacher. Luke centres the scene especially clearly on the Passion by stressing that they were speaking of the 'exodus' he was to accomplish at Jerusalem - again the Lukan stress on Jerusalem.

The fact that the disciples are praying, and are the same three disciples as are present at the Agony in the Garden, is a strong link to the Passion of Jesus. It is also part of Luke's stress on prayer, for Luke mentions Jesus' prayer and the importance of prayer on several occasions and in several parables (the Unjust Judge, the Friend at Midnight, the Pharisee and the Tax Collector).

Question:

What do you find the best form of prayer? Can you improve it during Lent? Jesus was transfigured on the Holy Mountain. What makes a mountain holy?
