

Second Sunday of Lent 2019

Genesis 15: 5-12 17-18

Mthr Mel Marshall

Psalm 27

Philippians 3: 17 - 4: 1

Luke 9: 28-36

Go on - how often have you cheated?

Eating? Five hail Marys.

Drinking? Ten hail Marys.

Sleeping instead of staying up for compline or rising for dawn devotions - ten hail Marys for you, and ten for Clare and Nevsky, who need the sleep more than you do. Other bodily pleasures which as a godly matron I will not name? No hail Marys for that. That brings its own penance in the fullness of time. As Clare and Nevsky know.

A poor show. Can the apostles do better? In today's gospel, it seems so. Peter, James and John are weighed down with sleep, Luke tells us; but they stay awake, and see Christ in glory.

Fast forward to chapter 22, however, and find the same Peter, James and John snoozing away in the garden of Gethsemane, while the Lord sweats blood. "Why are you sleeping?" demands Jesus. "Get up and pray not to come to the time of trial." Too late. The time of trial has come to them. They have failed it.

We think we love Jesus, we really do. But then, there's always something. If not fatigue, hunger; if not hunger, thirst; or anger, or lust, or pain, or cold, or - horrors - trying to impress someone. Like Peter, who one minute acclaims the Christ, the chosen of God, and the next says "I never knew the man" - we, too, are no good at keeping our promises.

I was baptised at five weeks old, so I can offload responsibility for those broken promises onto my godparents - if I'd been given any, which thanks to the peculiar rigours of presbyterianism, I wasn't. Of course those baptismal promises were renewed

in Confirmation, so for the last eleven years of sloth and laxity, I have no one to blame. As for the promises at my deaconing and priesting - the offices rushed, the visits skimped – well, I don't think Desmond Tutu, who laid hands on me and received my very first priestly blessing, would be much impressed if he could see me today. My new husband, however sees me every day, a constant witness to my inadequacy to our shared vows. Although: as a second marriage, ours has a mere 31% chance of ending in divorce, against a national divorce rate for first-time marriages of 45 in a hundred. Dismal statistics; and they make the ice-cream I ate while writing this sermon look like small-fry. Keeping our promises just is not my, nor St Peter's, nor many people's, it seems - strong suit.

So, what to do? “Saw up some animals” is the solution offered by our Old Testament reading – this being how a covenant was ratified in ancient Israel. As the Lord says in Jeremiah (34.18): “And those who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make like the calf when they cut it in two and passed between its parts: their corpses shall become food for the birds of the air and the wild animals of the earth.” The sundered corpses represent the fate of the promise-breaker and hence the guarantee of the deal. I'm surprised Teresa May hasn't tried it. Yet.

And so, when we hear today's passage from Genesis, we're expecting **Abram** to have to walk through his bisected menagerie, Abram to have to prove his *bona fides*. But then he doesn't. God does. God initiates the covenant, and God makes himself the forfeit, appearing as a blaze of light between these symbolic halves.

Rather like Jesus is revealed in a blaze of light, between Moses and Elijah, heaven-come-to-earth, and earth-come-to-heaven, the law on the one hand the prophets on the other, all now fulfilled, and ratified, in Jesus, resplendent.

We might think ahead, too, to Jesus displayed again in the blaze of the noon-day sun, exposed, crucified. Flanked by a pair of broken bodies - sacrifices, we might say, to human “justice”; that is, to our cruelty, our retribution in unconvincing juridical fancy-dress.

And then we might think back to God's promise to Abram, to make us children of light, shining like stars in the world's darkness. And of Christ, the gleaming fulfilment of that promise. And of Christ's own body, riven, split, pulled apart; Christ on whom we inflict the curse of the promise-breaker; Christ, the scapegoat - the scape-heifer, scape-ram, scape-dove, scape-pigeon - for OUR broken promises, the ways we fail and disappoint ourselves.

But praise be: Christ **chose** that cursed walk, that journey through his own ravaged corpse, to emerge as the light, that lightens all men, and that no darkness can overcome.

But that, for us, is still a month away. Till then, we have promises to keep! Or, fail to keep, as God knows full well. I mean, when did you last hear a psalm that ended 'Oh Lord, put thou thy trust in Israel?'

And you know, I think it's part of Lent that we fail. Don't get me wrong. It's great to succeed. If our belly is our god, then it is good to trudge up the mountain of self-denial, and there to see Christ, more clearly than we did before.

But if we slip; or forget; discover a new but profound devotion to St Turibius of Mongrovejo (whose feast is on Saturday, for the truly desperate), if we like the apostles fall asleep on the job - well, there's a blessing in that, too. The blessing of remembering that our salvation is not up to us. That it is, as Paul says in today's epistle, Christ who will transform our earthly body to conform it to his glorious body. Not us. But Christ, who has power to make all things subject to himself. Who became the sundered corpse, for us. And to whose cross we cling for dear life. We, who have no power of ourselves to help ourselves. We, who like Peter in today's gospel, don't know what we're saying. Who, like Christ's executioners, don't know what we are doing. Who like Abram, have righteousness simply reckoned to us, a free gift.

I don't remember the free gift of my baptism. But my confirmation, in this church, I remember as the happiest day of my life (up till then). My friend Marcus Walker - now vicar of St Bartholomew the Great - remarked on this joy, this effulgence. And waved

away my explanations. “That”, he said, “was the Holy Ghost.” And if you’ve seen someone on the day of their ordination, or marriage, when they first receive Holy Communion or the sacrament of reconciliation - you’ll know the look I mean. Transfigured. Not by their promise, but by God’s.

So what will **we** forfeit, if **we** fail to keep our Lenten promises? Absolutely nothing whatsoever. Eat the chips, if you want. Bathe in guilt and self-reproach, if that’s your preferred form of self-indulgence. You just don’t have the power to break a covenant which God has sealed, in his own blood. What you can do - what a little fasting may even help you do - is put thou thy trust in the Lord. From this time forth, forever more. Amen.