

Second Sunday in Lent

St Marylebone – 24 February 2013

5 The Lord brought Abram outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be.' 6And Abram believed the Lord.' Genesis 15:5-6

One cold, clear night earlier this month I arrived after dark in Salisbury Cathedral Close, on my way to a conference. As I turned from the noisy streets into the silence and spaciousness of the Close itself there in front of me was the cathedral with its floodlit spire pointing up at an endless cascade of spectacularly bright stars in a pitch black sky. Having lived 14 years in London I'm a bit star-deprived these days and I laughed out loud because it was simply so beautiful.

So put yourself in Abram's place on the starry night of his vision. It wasn't the first time the Lord had spoken to him: Abram had already been promised that he would father a great nation who would fill the land of Canaan to the north, south, east and west, and that the task of numbering his descendants would be like counting the dust of the earth. Now he hears *'Do not be afraid, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.'* Which, as one writer has pointed out, didn't go down very well because God's first promise to Abram was back in Chapter 12, when he was the ripe young age of 75 - and we're now in Chapter 15, with no sign of a son and heir.

Abram has clearly had enough and says, *'What will you give me, for I continue childless ...? You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to*

be my heir.' Which is when he is taken out to see the night sky and told: '*Look towards heaven and count the stars ... So shall your descendants be.*' At which point he believes the Lord, and the Lord, apparently, considers him to be righteous. No disrespect to the Lord but I don't think righteousness was the half of it. What Abram obviously had in bucket-loads was *imagination*. It must have taken a mighty suspension of disbelief for him to believe that the promise might actually come true. But he did. And it did: with a few rather shocking and unexpected turns of the plot, but nevertheless Abram and his extraordinary wife Sarah did beget a vast nation.

And that's what it's like, being human and being in relationship with God. We have to be able to take our cynicism, our disbelief, our impatience and our low expectations of others and ourselves and say to God 'Show me this situation as you can see it; show me a different possible future. And give me the imagination, the courage and the tenacity to work with you make it happen'.

The priest and poet Rachel Mann, in her recent book 'Dazzling Darkness', writes: '(God's) expectations go ahead of those he comes to, as if waiting for them to catch up'.¹ God believes in us unreservedly and with far more confidence than we have in God or ourselves. We are capable of so much more than we realise until God draws back the curtain over a starlit sky and asks us to use our imagination.

All the best things in life point towards the truth that we have potential beyond our own understanding. We find ourselves capable of unexpected things: of relishing challenges at work which, a decade ago, we would have done anything to avoid; of

¹ Rachel Mann *Dazzling Darkness* p102

nurturing children with a selflessness we know we didn't used to have; of loving our parents in their irascible old age; of forgiving those who systematically trample on our dreams; of trusting strangers; of starting again the morning after a terrible row; of falling in love again after losing a life partner. We find ourselves capable of hope and imagination when we least have the energy. We find ourselves believing that in the mess and the miracle of this enchanting and volatile world God might actually be alongside us in a good way. There is no chasm between God's life and ours – it's all part of the same divine-human package – and if we can believe that God believes in us, we can also believe in ourselves.

In this morning's gospel reading from Luke we heard Jesus raging about the city of Jerusalem. For centuries Jerusalem had been iconic for the followers of Yahweh but had not always pointed people towards God as a good icon should. Its religious authorities had been hostile towards the prophets, misunderstanding and mistreating them, and failing to be inspired by their vision of radical justice and generous hospitality for the poor, the marginalised and the asylum seeker.

In an attempt to keep things clean and simple and to preserve a clear religious identity, the Temple and its leaders had promoted false separations between tradition and innovation, ritual and creativity, purity and love. It was a religion that had starved its people of imagination and distanced them from God. The Franciscan teacher Richard Rohr tells us: 'Religion is not doing its job if it only reminds you of your distance, your unworthiness, your sinfulness, and your inadequacy before

God's greatness'. Bad religion 'deliberately increases the gap' between us and God: 'the very gap that Jesus came to deny and undo'.²

The Temple had increased the gap between people and God and so Jesus cries, 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings!' How often had he longed to restore the intimacy between humanity and God.

To have faith in God requires both honesty and imagination. For much of the time we live as though God is elsewhere, nowhere or irrelevant. Perhaps because we can't bear the disappointment of trying and failing to understand what God is doing in the seemingly endless and intractable tragedies of the world; perhaps because bad religion has taught us that God is mighty, judgmental and exacting, rather than tender as a mother protecting her children in her arms; or perhaps because we've left behind in childhood our capacity to wonder at the stars. With Abram we should be unafraid to interrogate God about the many things that seem to make no sense – about the seemingly broken promises of our own lives and other people's. And we may often be met with silence. Yet in spite of ourselves we might yet dare imagine that God's expectations go ahead of us, waiting for each one of us to catch up.

And so to the same God be ascribed all love, longing, tenderness and grace, now and for ever. Amen.

²²² Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond*, p101 and 102