

## **Sermon 13/02/22 Genesis 15: 1-12. 17-18, Luke 13: 31-end**

### **Self or others?**

Have you had that experience when there seems to be a common theme running through life? No matter what you read, watch, whatever your conversations something is ever present? Well, that happened to me last week.

It started because as I was officially 'ill' with covid I decided to watch the episodes of the fourth series of the Crown that I hadn't got round to. The first one related to the tension between the Queen and Margaret Thatcher, who was then Prime Minister, over sanctions in respect of South Africa. The Queen supported sanctions against South Africa as a means of isolating the apartheid regime, but Mrs Thatcher felt that they would damage the British economy. Stop Britain from being great. And possibly affect her son's business activities. It was self-interest that mattered.

And the international news has been dominated by the self interest of the Russian president in respect of Ukraine.

This may have coloured my reading of today's Old Testament passage because although I really want Abraham to be a loveable, upstanding character I found that I was looking at him differently. 'It's not fair', he says to God, 'You have given me all these good things but I have no one to pass them on to, my only heir is a servant'. There is also an issue about the land itself, Abraham questions its ownership. Here is Abraham, usually so keen to do God's bidding, feeling insecure about the future and allowing his self interest to get the upper hand.

God tells him to stop worrying about the children, they will come, and be numerous, more than the number of stars in the sky. But then he mithers over the land. God again sets his mind at rest, again promises that Abraham is his favoured one and all will be well. But it is only following an elaborate covenant ceremony that Abraham is comforted and appears once more to be righteous.

Much as I want Abraham not to question, but to just get on with life, whatever it looks like, I can't help but have sympathy with him. That need for security, for now and the future is fundamental to our human nature. It is not an automatic reaction to put our own interests last. To genuinely put others first is not intuitive. Or if we do, it will often be about putting our own friends and families first, not a genuine lack or self interest.

But we read in the gospel that Jesus did just that. Warned that he was not safe around Herod and should leave the area, Jesus does not run. Instead he explains that there are things he needs to do and that he fully understands the danger he is in. Furthermore he is going to do those things for the three days that it will take. Herod is portrayed as a wily fox but Jesus is defiant and will not veer from his original course.

Jerusalem is the key. The city of the Jews. The place of their temple, the place where tradition has it you should celebrate the Passover. 'It is impossible', says Jesus, 'for a prophet to die outside of Jerusalem'. And yet Jesus does not have a good word for the place.

Jerusalem is where prophets are stoned and killed. It is the place whose children he would like to gather under his wings as a mother hen does, but they were unresponsive. It is generally understood that the image of the hen refers particularly to the way that hens have gathered their chicks together during a fire, have themselves been burned to death, but once the fire is out the chicks have run free. The hen has saved the lives of the chicks by dying herself.

Within this passage there are several signposts to the passion story. Jesus has work to do for two days and will accomplish his purpose on the third day. The hen has given her life so that others can live. He gave his life for our lives.

The contrast between the heroism of Jesus. I am threatened, I am defiant, I know from history that Jerusalem is a place where prophets die. I am called to give my life for yours, and you don't even seem to care, but I shall do it. And the insecurity of Abraham, I have been fortunate but I want an heir to pass my fortune onto, God says he has given me land, but I need assurance that it is mine, could not be more pronounced.

In Genesis we learn that God made humankind in his image but it is an image that falls short of the original. We humans struggle not to put ourselves first. We see stockpiling, fighting over territory, favouritism, injustice. Those things we are thinking about in our Lent groups. By the way its not too late to join one of them. Either face to face in Church House on Wednesday afternoon, or online on Thursday evening.

Not all self interest is on the scale of President Putin, or Margaret Thatcher. I caught myself sitting on a train at half term mithering over how slow the coffee trolley was in getting to me. The day before, following the storms, I would have been pleased just to be on a train heading for Bristol. How often do any of us volunteer for a job that we don't want to do? I don't mean the ones where someone twists your arm, I mean genuinely volunteering. It is easy to offer to do the things that are appealing and leave the rest to others. Do we think we are too talented for some jobs, too important to do others?

God, in Jesus, died for us because he loved us. He still loves us. Jesus persisted in going to Jerusalem despite knowing what would happen because to him we matter. There was no self interest. In his book 'Dear England', Stephen Cottrell, the Archbishop of York talks about our love of the world and the world that we would like to inhabit, and 'the sacrifices we might be prepared to make to see such love lived out'. How much are we prepared to put self last?