

2nd Sunday of Lent, Year C

Genesis 15.1-12,17-18 • Psalm 27 • Philippians 3.17 – 4.1 • Luke 13.31-35

Christ Church, Chelsea

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In the last week or two, Emily and I have been binge watching a new favourite programme. It's called *Couples Therapy*. The set-up is simple. We get to watch four different real-life couples as they meet a psychoanalytic therapist to discuss their relationship difficulties. And it is rollercoaster viewing. One minute we are shouting at the TV, 'Alan, how can you behave like that?!'. And the next we're crying, 'Evelyn, stop pushing away Alan like that. Can't you see you're being haunted by your childhood?!' Our responses oscillate as we learn new information about each couple. And there is at the same time an underlying tenderness to the whole show. We are being invited into the relationship of two other people who truly care about one another. We witness the love that brought them together, as well as the complex dynamics that cause them so much grief.

In marriage couples make a series of promises to one another, to 'have and to hold ... till death do us part'. Marriage is, in short, a covenant. It is not a contract, set down in legal terms with means of enforcement. Marriage is a covenant, a set of promises upheld by both parties out of trust in and care for one another. The couples on the telly want to uphold their covenant. These want to make things work, even if at times they drive one another up the wall.

Turn to today's readings and we have a situation not unlike *Couples Therapy*. Lifelong promises have been made. One of the two parties has broken those promises. But there remains a longing to make things work.

We see the formation of those promises in our Old Testament reading. Here we encounter Abram, a tribal leader. In a few chapters time,¹ he will be renamed Abraham. But for now, he is simply Abram. Abram has two major predicaments. In the first place, he has no children, and both he and his wife Sarah are aged over 70. Second, he is a wealthy tribal leader with a large herd of animals,² but no land.

But in today's reading, in two episodes, a new covenant is formed between God and Abram. First God comes to him in a vision. Abram is taken outside his tent to look up at the cloudless night sky with its millions of gleaming stars

¹ Gen 17.5

² Gen 13.2

(I wonder where you were when you last did that). And God doesn't just reiterate but extends his promise to Abram: he will have a child *and* he will have as many descendants as there are stars in the sky.

And then God repeats his promise to Abram that he will receive the land of Canaan. Given all that has gone before, Abram's response is understandable: 'O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?'. And proof is what Abram gets. It is a rather bizarre scene to our modern eyes, but it seems to have been an acceptable way of making a solemn oath in Abram's day.³ Take a number of good-sized animals; halve them as neatly as you can, clear a path between the pieces, and require each partner to walk between them as a sort of self-curse. By passing through the severed bodies of the animals, each partner says, in effect, 'May the same thing happen to me if I do not keep my word.' It is a more involved way of proclaiming 'cross my heart and hope to die'.

So this is how God forms his covenant with Abram. Abram wades through the bloodied carcasses, waving off the vultures who are trying to make off with a bit of flesh of a particular juicy animal. Night falls and Abram falls into a deep sleep, exhausted no doubt by the effort of rounding up and slaughtering so many animals. And in this deep and dark sleep Abram sees a pot of fire and a flaming torch pass between the animals. God has appeared and passed through the animals himself. A set of binding promises, a covenant, is formed. God is bound in love with Abram and Abram's promised descendants, the Israelites.

Fast forward 2000 years and we have some important couples therapy to do. The covenant with Abram remains. The Jewish people have survived and multiplied. They entered into the Promised Land. God has since added new covenants: new sets of promises made with Moses and with David. But one of the couple seems to have serious, recurring issues around trust and faithfulness. Israel has repeatedly gone off to worship other gods. Israel has repeatedly ignored the prophets, God's messengers calling his people back to covenant faithfulness.

And now, in our gospel reading, we hear another pleading love letter from God. Jesus, God incarnate, speaks with tender longing for God's people, and for the city that is earthly heart of God's covenant with Israel. 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem. ... How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings!'. Jesus is the hen, willing to die in battle with the fox to give her children a chance of survival. He longs for his chicks to seek his protection. And yet, as we know and will trace in Holy

³ Cf *Genesis*, New Cambridge Biblical Commentary, p.159. For the sentences that follow on the covenant, see Barbara Brown Taylor, *Mixed Blessings*, p.4

Week, the city that will welcome Jesus is also the city that will reject him, giving him up to crucifixion.

So what, I wonder, would our *Couples Therapy* counsellor observe if, on the couch opposite her, sat on one side God, and on the other side Israel – speaking of their long history together, looking at one another with tender glances?

Perhaps she would turn to Israel and say, ‘So, what are you thinking?’ And Israel would reel off a long story: the heady times filled with longing for God, but also the times when God seemed absent, the times they had assumed God would act one way but then hadn’t.

And perhaps our therapist might then turn to God and say, ‘God, are you expecting too much of Israel?’ And God might respond: ‘I created Israel. I know what it’s capable of. And there’s just one thing I expect of Israel. It’s what Abram offered me that night when I showed him all the stars in the night sky. Abram believed me; he trusted me. That, for me, was righteousness. That’s all I want: I know the Israelites may struggle to be perfect, but I just want them to trust me. I created them; I love them; I will care for them through the good times and the bad. And then God might turn from the counsellor to face Israel in the eyes, and utter quietly, ‘Trust me. I will always be faithful to you.’

That’s a little glimpse of the covenant between God and Israel. But after the resurrection of Jesus, the early Christians begin to speak of another new covenant. It builds on those covenants with Abram, Moses and David. This time, however, this is a covenant not just for the Jews but for all the world. It is a covenant by which, through Christ, God has brought the whole world into new and right relationship with himself. God has entered into a new covenant with us.

So just imagine yourself on that therapist’s couch with God. ‘What are you thinking?’, the therapist asks you. There’s a history no doubt for you to tell – a history of hopes and hurts, of blessings and woes, of faith and doubt. Perhaps this Lent is a time to recall that long journey of faith you have taken so far, as if you were on that couch. God listens intently as you speak. And then imagine God turning to you and saying: ‘Lots of that must have hurt. We can talk about that. But hear this. I made you. I love you. I want everlasting life with you. I have made a covenant with you. I don’t expect an answer now. But I hope that, one day, you can trust me. I want your good. And know this: whatever you say, I will stay with you forever.’ How do you respond?