

*Instead of sharing my thoughts on the readings for the coming Sundays, during Lent I will reflect on various Lenten themes, perhaps using one or more of the Sunday readings as a prompt. Today we will think about the Lenten observance and indeed our Christian life as a journey or pilgrimage. We follow Jesus on his journey to the cross and to resurrection, to death and to life, meaning for ourselves a process of transformation. Living in Christ involves dying to the old ways and standards of life which are controlled by the self, culture, group identity, wealth, possessions, and whatever other 'gods' obstruct our call to enjoy a Christ life, a God-centred life. Lent is a time for us to reflect, repent (turn around) and recommit to the Christian journey, finding the faith and courage to trust in God and to follow the Way of Christ more deeply.*

This Sunday (Lent 2) in our Old Testament reading we will meet Abram, whom God would rename Abraham, meaning 'the father of a multitude.' He had set out to follow the directions of an unknown God. It involved a journey, a migration to a new country. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that Abram set out 'not knowing where he was going' (Heb. 11: 8). He was already well past retirement age, but he bravely obeyed the call of his God, and because of his humility and courage God said that Abram would be a blessing to all the tribes on earth.

Abram's journey was particularly risky and would no doubt have been considered crazy by his people and even his family. For it seems that no one else knew this God whose word he was apparently obeying. In a world where people worshipped many gods, Abram's God was an unknown God.

His situation is familiar enough today. For so many people, the whole idea of God, faith and spirituality is a complete unknown, a no-go area. Putting your trust in an unknown or uncertain Being, Spirit, Presence, whatever, whose existence or reality is not obvious can easily be met with incredulity, ridicule and even outright hostility from some of our contemporaries for whom the material world and universe is all there is (without seriously thinking how and why it is here, something that science alone cannot answer). It is bad enough for some of them that you go to church. But to suggest that you are going to do this or that in life because you are obeying or testing God's call, can cause some people to think that you have 'lost the plot,' and may even have serious mental health issues. Don't worry, I was 'sectioned' a long time ago!

I hope we are all aware that the reality of God cannot be proved, certainly not by any scientific or philosophical method. But the witness of so many people throughout history, of sound-minded saints, mystics, theologians and ordinary seekers, strongly suggests that God can be understood, known and experienced, if people are serious in their search or enquiry. Then it's a question of whether others are able to discover that experience for themselves, or at least accept the validity of the experience of others. Many will dismiss it by pointing to the problems that religion apparently causes in the world, or the less-than-ideal behaviour of some people they know to be so-called religious, or the old favourite, whether there can possibly be a God (as they understand the concept) when there is so much suffering in the

world or in their own experience. There are no doubt many people currently blaming God for not stopping the Coronavirus pandemic or even for not intervening to prevent Russia invading Ukraine!

It is still quite widely assumed that we Christians and other 'God-botherers' worship some super controlling daddy figure in the sky, with or without a white beard, and who has now shown that 'he' can't be relied on. Karen Armstrong puts the problem succinctly in her excellent book, 'The Case for God.' Reflecting on her own early experience she says, 'Many of us have been left stranded with an incoherent concept of God. We learned about God at about the same time as we were told about Santa Claus. But while our understanding of the Santa Claus phenomenon evolved and matured, our theology (our understanding of God) remained somewhat infantile. Not surprisingly, when we attained intellectual maturity, many of us rejected the God we had inherited and denied that he existed.'

The journey towards God and a growth in knowledge and faith has for so many people never got off the ground, and their understanding is stuck somewhere in a pre-primary school world of thought, which makes God easy to dismiss.

Our awesome task as Christian disciples is to present another and bigger picture of the reality of God, one that has the capability of challenging and moving the doubting and the unbelieving. First and foremost, we ourselves need to be humble enough to continue seeking the way, following the directions which lead to God, the Sacred, the Wholly Other, call God what you will. This is where our daily and weekly spiritual exercises are so important, the constant seeking and growing in God and being nourished by God through prayer and contemplation, scripture and sacrament and other useful faith-based activities, on our own and together.

The most significant revelation of God in the world has been experienced in human form, in the person of Jesus. We should therefore only expect that further revelations of God's presence and activity should also be made known in human lives, not least through those who follow Jesus and together are called to be his living visible Body on earth. If we are Christ-ones, Christians, if we are faithfully following Christ and striving to live as he taught and showed, then with or without an emotional spiritual experience, we have been born again in the Spirit of God with the capability of revealing God's likeness and God's values, for we are God's children. We have been given this rebirth most of all so that our lives will make a difference to the world, will help God transform the world. 'God is love, and whoever lives in love lives in God and God lives in them.' (1 John 4: 16) It should become clear that we best reveal the reality of God by the quality of our living, loving and doing, right here in our everyday normality.

Abraham left his home and familiar surroundings to follow the directions of an unknown God. Because of Jesus Christ, we have a much bigger advantage than he did, the assurance that God is not only very close to us but is living in us, working through us, and drawing us ever deeper into our identity as children of God and the experience of our true humanity.

What is required of us is that we choose to follow this road, and when sometimes the way is not entirely clear or we have strayed from it, may we have the humility and the courage to seek again our loving God's directions and discover again the joy of life in its fullness and freedom, the life of the Spirit, life in God.

*God our Father, your Son Jesus has given us a clear path in life to follow and a bright view of how our struggles, our efforts to change ourselves and our world, lead to life and to victory over death and pain and evil. May he strengthen us to join him in his passion that we may also share in his glory and bear witness that our faith is good news of joy and light and life. We ask this in his name, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*