

<b>Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> February 2016</b> <b>Cathedral, Grahamstown</b> <b>7.30 &amp; 9.30 a.m.</b>		<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent</b> <b>Ember Day</b>
Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18	Psalm 27	Philippians 3:17-4:1
		Luke 13:31-35
<b>PRAYER IN THE MIDST OF TURMOIL</b>		

“One thing I have asked from the Lord which I will require: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to see the fair beauty of the Lord: and to seek his will in his temple. For he will hide me under his shelter in the day of trouble: and conceal me in the shadow of his tent and set me high upon a rock.” (Ps 27:4-6)

## **Lent**

We are well into the season of Lent – the forty days, excluding Sundays, from Ash Wednesday until Easter. Let’s remind ourselves: Lent is modelled on the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness – the time of prayer, fasting, temptation, struggle, facing the demons, preparing himself for all that lay ahead. Luke’s gospel reading last Sunday tells us that Jesus, “full of the Holy Spirit... wandered in the wilderness, led by the Spirit and tempted by the devil” (Lk 4:2). At the end of the forty days, having faced the temptations, Jesus “armed with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee...” (Lk 4:14).

Something happened to Jesus during his time of desolation, his time of temptation. Full of the Holy Spirit before his wilderness experience; afterwards, armed with the power of the Holy Spirit. This annual time of Lent is given to us by the church as our wilderness time, our time to withdraw, and to be empowered and strengthened by the Holy Spirit for ministry and witness. This is not a time when we run away, but rather a time when God arms us with power – the power of the Spirit. Let’s use the time well, in the midst of all that is happening, the turmoil and upheavals and challenges of our everyday lives.

So if this is a time of struggle for you, a time of desolation, a time of temptation, a time when you are feeling alone and isolated – if this is

your wilderness time – don't despair. Allow God to use this time to shape you, to strengthen you, to encourage you, and to guide you.

## **Our scriptures for today**

Lent is a time that we are brought back to basics: we are brought again face to face with the nature of God – God's mercy and faithfulness; the call of God on our lives, God's direction and leading, God's presence with us in danger.

Our OT reading helps us here.

Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18 is the story of God's call to Abram. God invites Abram into a relationship of trust and hope and obedience. It is interesting to note that the name change from Abram to Abraham comes in Genesis 17, when Abram is given the sign of circumcision as the mark of the covenant relationship: a new name, a new relationship - just as we are given our names at baptism, as a sign that we become children of God, sons and daughters of the Lord.

The invitation from God comes in the context of Abram's life question and heartache – the fact that he and his wife Sarai had no children, that his life was empty and fruitless. The word of the Lord comes to Abram, with a promise: "Look up at the sky, and count the stars, if you can. So many will your descendants be." (Gen 15:5).

God invites us into relationship. The rest of the Old Testament, the New Testament, the coming of Jesus Christ, his birth, death and resurrection, the life of faith – is the story of relationship. God reaches out to you and me. "God loved the world so much that he gave his only son, that all who believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (Jn 3:16) In the words of Jesus, "I came that they may have life, and life in all its fullness." (Jn 10:10a).

God calls into a relationship of fruitfulness, of blessing, of hope, of a future. We may think we are in a dead end, going no-where – God

calls us into a new space, a new place of hope, a new place of trust. God opens doors, God makes things possible.

## **Prayer**

The psalm expresses this relationship – it provides for us the words of prayer. It is prayer in the midst of turmoil, prayer and trust in the midst of enemies, prayer and hope in the midst of danger.

The psalmist asks:

“The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?” (Ps 27:1-2)

And then comes the answer:

“When the wicked, even my enemies and my foes, come upon me to devour me: they shall stumble and fall. If an army encamp against me, my heart shall not be afraid: and if war should rise against me yet will I trust.” (Ps 27:2-3)

And then the prayer of trust, from the place of trust:

“One thing I have asked from the Lord which I will require: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to see the fair beauty of the Lord: and to seek his will in his temple.

“For he will hide me under his shelter in the day of trouble: and conceal me in the shadow of his tent and set me high upon a rock.” (Ps 27:4-6)

Prayer is not an escape; our walk with God is not a way to shut our eyes to what is happening around us. Rather, prayer is a place and space in our lives when we find our strength and our hope. It is prayer in the midst of turmoil. It is the time when we look to God; when we cast ourselves upon the mercy of God; when we say to God, “I can do

nothing without you; I need you for every breath, every step that I take: help me, as I look to you.”

This Lent comes at a time when many of us may be spread very thin indeed. We are stretched, some of us, almost to the point of breaking: “to the point where anxiety and stress are constant companions.”<sup>1</sup> Let’s use this Lent to regain the rhythm of daily prayer, of daily silence, the quiet time, scripture readings, meditation, contemplation – the practice of prayer, which brings us back into the place and space of trust and hope and life.

Fr Jean Vanier, of the L’Arche community, wrote, “Prayer is rest; it is to be still, to abide in the presence and in the arms of God, knowing that we are.” He also wrote, “Prayer is not, first and foremost, saying prayers. It is opening the most intimate part of ourselves to God. It is discovering that in the deepest part of our body and our being there is a source, and that source is God. God is the power that unites the universe and gives everything meaning.”<sup>2</sup>

In many ways, we are in a fragile time, both here in Grahamstown and nationally. Economic turmoil; campus protest action here and elsewhere. Seething anger, accusations and turmoil on social media. Race and racism. Many feeling silenced, disempowered. As new empty nest parents, Claire and I are so very conscious of our darling children, at university elsewhere – and so we think of other parents; and of students here amongst us getting used to the new academic year, the lectures and assignments; making new friends, feeling their way in a new context, first years away from home, coping with homesickness, new food, new environment. Prayer in the midst of turmoil.

We think of university administrations, Vice Chancellors here and all over our country; the SRCs and student leadership generally; academic staff; all who work on our campuses; all students. We hold each one, you all, in prayer. We pray with you and for you. Our

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<sup>1</sup> <http://livingchurch.org>, accessed 15<sup>th</sup> February 2016

<sup>2</sup> Daily Thoughts from Jean Vanier, May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2011

universities have the challenge of allowing and maintaining freedom of speech, peaceful protest – while ensuring the safety of all students and staff, and the rights of everyone to learn and to study. Destruction of property, vandalism, intimidation, violence will only be negative and will achieve nothing. So much is at stake. The university is bending over backwards to make it possible for academically deserving but financially needy students to receive an education. Let us support these efforts in every way we can. Prayer in the midst of turmoil.

## **CONCLUSION**

And so we savour and delight in the relationship of love and trust into which the Lord invites us.

“One thing I have asked from the Lord which I will require: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to see the fair beauty of the Lord: and to seek his will in his temple. For he will hide me under his shelter in the day of trouble: and conceal me in the shadow of his tent and set me high upon a rock.” (Ps 27:4-6)

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