

Lent 2

Luke 13:31-35

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1

On the wall in my study, I have a photograph of the staff and pupils of Buckingham College School, Harrow, as they looked way back in June 1987. I had just finished my 'O' levels there, and was about to go to a different school for sixth form. And I often wonder, as I look at the picture, what had become of those with whom I used to sit in lessons day and day out. Many had no doubt gone into successful professional careers, whilst others (like myself) perhaps went on to do rather different things in life, and no doubt on the way, there have been various setbacks, disappointments and trials to contend with. Our different journeys in life often take us in directions which we had not expected – we can never really be sure of where our journeys will lead in the end.

In our Old Testament reading from Genesis, we encounter Abram (soon to be called Abraham by

God) who was himself starting out on a journey. It was a journey he was making in response to a call of God upon his life, and there were certainly many setbacks along the way. It was a journey which Abraham would not have known where it would lead – he was to take it all on trust. But even though he might not have known the outcome of his journeying, God was ultimately in control – working out his purposes through his servant Abraham. And the promises made here by God to Abraham – numerous descendants and a land to possess – were not simply ends in themselves, but rather his offspring - the people of Israel - were called to be a light to the nations through whom the one true living God was to reveal himself to *all* people. And these promises, of course, find their ultimate fulfilment in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah of Israel and Saviour of humankind.

And in our Gospel reading, too, Jesus is on a journey – a journey towards Jerusalem – towards the Cross, the climax of God's intentions for the salvation of humankind. But on his way, Jesus encounters various

things which try to distract him from his mission. The temptations (which we thought about last Sunday) were one such distraction. And so here, again, an attempt is made by some Pharisees to distract Jesus from his primary task by informing him about Herod's death threats against him – "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." But the Lord's response is firm – he's not going to be side-tracked by Herod; he has a little while more of his earthly ministry and *then* his work will be finished (on the "third day", as he puts it). There is an urgency in Christ's message – the time in which people can enter through the 'narrow door' of salvation is *not* unlimited – the NOW is all-important.

So, what do the journeys of Abraham and of Christ say to us about our own journey of discipleship?

Well, firstly, they remind us of the fact that God works out his intentions for the salvation of humankind *in spite of* attempts by humans to thwart it. The Pharisees who pass on Herod's death threats to Jesus were trying to throw his ministry 'off

course', as it were, but ultimately it is *God* who will determine when and where he will die – the divine purposes *will* be fulfilled. And likewise, right at the *beginning* of God's rescue mission for humanity, there are various things which try to get in the way of its fulfilment – not least Abraham's own doubts which God has to overcome. But God's will *was* done in the end.

And today, too, there are many ways in which satan attempts to hinder the advancement of the gospel. In various parts of the world there are oppressive regimes which try to ban Christians from proclaiming the good news, while in other places religious extremists attempt to eliminate Christianity from their lands. But despite this, the Church continues to grow rapidly in these areas – God won't allow his word to be held back by anyone – he '*is* working his purpose out as year succeeds to year'. Indeed, the fastest-growing church in the Middle East at present is in the Islamic Republic of Iran! But *we* too, need to be careful that *we* are not putting off people from accepting the Lord through any words, actions and

attitudes which betray *our* high calling as disciples of Jesus Christ. If we're simply carrying on like everyone else and are failing to live distinctive lives as believers, then we're not going to particularly convince others to become Christians. We really need to be 'walking the talk' of faith at all times.

Then secondly, we're reminded that our own journey of discipleship will often encounter various distractions. As with the journeys of Abraham and of Christ himself, there are various things which frequently try to distract us from *our* walk with the Lord. It may be those times when particular trials and difficulties come our way – times when we ask ourselves, 'well, where *is* God in all this?' Or equally, in the 'good' times, when all seems to be going well in life, we can so easily forget the Lord. There are others things, of course, which might try to pull us away from our walk with him. It might be the distraction of money and material possessions, when these become more important to us than our relationship with and our love for God. Or distractions might simply come in the form of our

desire to want our own way – for our *own* will to be done – rather than being truly open to God's will for our lives.

In our reading from Philippians, the apostle Paul speaks of those who "live as enemies of the cross of Christ" – those whose outlook is purely earthbound, their minds being set on *earthly* things; and so *this* governs their whole approach to life. By contrast, Paul says that those who are sincerely striving to walk in the way of Christ are those who recognise that *their* citizenship is in heaven and whose minds are constantly set on things *heavenly* – on the things of God. There's a constant pressure for *us* to be drawn down the way that leads ultimately to destruction – to feel the compulsion to follow that lifestyle which is typified by the behaviour of those Paul calls the 'enemies of the cross of Christ'. So, we need to heed the same word which Paul gave to the believers in 1st century Philippi – to remain resolute – to "stand firm in the Lord..." Remember that, despite all the attempts to distract *Jesus* from his mission and purpose, he nonetheless knew his Father's will

and always remained obedient to it. And so it must be with *our* journey of discipleship.

And thirdly, we're reminded that the way of Christian discipleship will inevitably involve suffering. The Lord Jesus was journeying to Jerusalem where he would suffer and die. And if we are called to follow in his footsteps, then we're going to experience some kind of persecution for doing so. Jesus had to endure the cross before receiving the crown of glory, and so for us too, the way to glory is *not* going to be a 'bed of roses' – far from it. Now persecution might not be something which we would immediately associate with following Christ in *this* country. But I do believe that something of it *is* there, simmering under the surface, as it were, and that it's possibly on the increase.

On the personal level, if we are sincerely wanting to walk in the light of Christ, we will no doubt, from time to time or perhaps even more frequently, experience some opposition. It might be amongst our non-Christian friends in the local community or

amongst our colleagues at work – those times when we refuse to join in with the local gossip or office tittle-tattle, or when we refuse to collude with dishonest or immoral practices. Or it might even be opposition from our non-believing family members. When we really aim to live for Christ in our daily lives – when we really allow our faith to impact upon every aspect of our living and being – some kind of persecution is inevitable. And at the national level, too, up until recent times it might appear that we have been somewhat immune from persecution as Christian believers, but things are rapidly changing. It tends to be OK as long as you keep your faith to yourself – to keep it a private matter. But if we're aiming to openly proclaim our faith and to maintain a public Christian witness – as we ought to be doing - then the matter becomes rather different, and opposition inevitably comes along. Woe betide, for instance, any politician or media personality who actually wears their Christian faith 'on their sleeve', and even expresses their views which might conflict with the prevailing secular outlook of our society! They're in for a difficult time.

Now when I read about the situations of our many millions of brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who experience persecution, one thing which constantly emerges is the fact that they *expect* to suffer for following Christ, and indeed, they see it as a privilege to suffer for owning the Name of Jesus. Perhaps they've grasped something about the nature of true discipleship which we have not yet grasped. Maybe we need to contemplate what it means for *us* to remain faithful to Christ and to be ready to suffer gladly for the sake of the Name.

So, as we continue on through this season of Lent, let's take time to reflect upon our personal journey of discipleship – what it really means to take up our cross daily and to follow Jesus without wavering or compromising; so that when our Saviour returns in glory, we might be able to boldly declare, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are working out your purposes of salvation as year succeeds to year. As we continue to journey along the path of discipleship, help us *not* to be distracted by worldly concerns, and may we be emboldened in our witness to you in our daily lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.