

Easter 2

Isaiah 53:6-12 and Romans 4:13-24

Mother Emma

Perhaps you, like me, felt a bit puzzled by our first reading from the prophecy of Isaiah. This is such a very familiar passage, perhaps especially because of the beautiful chorus in Handel's Messiah which draws on this text; but the story of Isaiah's suffering servant is in general closely connected with the Passion of Christ, his suffering and his Death on the Cross. Why, then, have we suddenly apparently moved backwards from the glory and joy of the Resurrection which we celebrated last Sunday, to recalling the sadness and poignancy of Holy Week in our reading this week?

The traditional story associated with Low Sunday, the Sunday after Easter, is that of Thomas, the disciple who was unable to believe the joy of his friends' report that Jesus had risen from the dead. This was our Gospel reading at the Eucharist this morning, and I always feel it speaks to those who, following the excitement and beauty of Easter Day, nonetheless find themselves full of questions. Is it really possible that God raised Jesus from the dead? Is the faith we profess to follow really grounded in this seemingly extraordinary fact?

We are told that Easter Day is the foundation of our faith, and that the news of the Resurrection brings with it the promise of eternal glory with God, but even here, are we unwavering in our belief that we too shall rise like Christ and be with God forever? My sister, who is not a Christian believer, once asked me if I really believed I would rise in glory. When I said that I did, she said, "Aaah, that's cute!" Perhaps you have also received such responses – or more critically doubting ones, or perhaps you have even asked yourself questions like these.

Our second reading from Paul's Epistle to the Romans addresses the question of faith in the face of the seemingly impossible or unknowable. Paul is reassuring new Christians that God fulfils his promises. He reminds them of the story of Abraham, who in his old age, was promised that he should be the "*heir of the world*". Abraham, we are told, was close to 100 years old and his wife apparently well beyond the age of childbearing, when, as you may remember, three mysterious strangers arrived and, whilst enjoying the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah, told them that in order to fulfil his promise, God would enable them to conceive a child. Sarah, listening from the tent, let out a startled giggle at this news, as well she might, but the Lord rebuked her, saying, "*Is anything too hard for the Lord?*" – and indeed she did conceive and bear a son, Isaac.

Paul, in our reading today is keen to encourage the new Christians with the remembrance that with God, nothing is impossible, before he speaks of **their** faith in Christ's Resurrection from the dead. He also wants his readers in Rome to understand that the promises of God are not limited to the Jews who follow the Mosaic law. Almost at the beginning of Abraham's story, before he was circumcised, God made him this promise: "*Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be.*"

The birth of Isaac is the beginning of the fulfilment of this promise, and God has chosen Abraham because he was faithful, not because, at that time, he was circumcised or a follower of Jewish law. Paul assures the Corinthians that as the promise is made as the result of Abraham's faith, and is therefore fulfilled through God's grace, this grace is also available to all his descendants, whether Jew or Gentile. We are all included in this family of Abraham's descendants. Unlike Thomas the Apostle, Paul says "[Abraham] *staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strong in faith, giving glory to God.*"

Although what God is promising seems highly unlikely, Abraham is prepared to take him at his word and not to be limited by human possibilities. Abraham's faith showed him that God's mightiness and love were enough to do all things, so God rewards his faith and fulfils the promise. The term "faith" for Paul has been said to mean, not religion, but: "*Faith-in-God's-promises.*" Abraham demonstrated this faith in God through his belief that he would indeed mysteriously become the father of nations, and God saw him as righteous.

Paul tells the Corinthians that their faith will also be enough for God, through grace, to see them as righteous, if they too believe in God's promises and refuse to be held back by the apparently impossible. The difficult promises of Easter may be seen as twofold: first we look back to the promises made throughout the Old Testament, and also in Jesus' conversations with his disciples: that the Messiah would rise again from the dead after three days. Then, we are asked to believe in the promise of eternal life, made through the Resurrection, that all of us who trust and have faith, will rise again with Christ.

Paul, using what appears to be a well-established contemporary formula of faith in the final line of the reading, tells us that we too shall be seen as righteous if we are able to place our faith, hope and trust in both of these elements of our faith. To have a faith which does not, as Paul describes it, "*stagger*", is never easy. Like Thomas, many of us will have times when we wrestle with the details of the Christian story, and pray for greater faith and understanding. Yet when he saw the risen Christ, Thomas exclaimed, "*My Lord and my God!*" – a more explicit declaration of faith than those made by any of the other disciples.

Passing through a time of doubt is neither unusual nor wrong; it may be necessary to help us come to a true expression of faith; what matters is that we pray constantly for the gift of faith; that we take time to study and take to heart the stories and promises of the Bible, and that we come at last to declare with Thomas, "*My Lord and my God!*"

Amen.