

Sunday, February 25th. 2024. Lent 2

Genesis 17.1-7,15-16, Psalm 22.23-end, Mark 8.31-38

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

A paradox is a seemingly absurd or contradictory statement, which is, or may be, true, or an opinion, which conflicts with common belief. It occurs famously in *The Pirates of Penzance*, where Frederic was born on February 29th, so, instead of being aged 21, he is reckoned to be only 5 “and a little bit over”. This is “That most ingenious paradox”:

How quaint the ways of paradox
At common sense she gaily mocks!
Though counting in the usual way,
Years 21 I’ve been alive.
Yet, reckoning by my natal day,
Yet, reckoning by my natal day,
I am a little boy of five.

That paradox, that paradox,
That most ingenious paradox.

Today’s readings are full of paradox. The first reading begins with a call to Abram at the age of 99, where the covenant promises are stated and God is revealed as ‘God all knowing.’ The command to ‘walk before me and be blameless’ requires that Abram conduct himself before God in complete obedience. The promises are, numerous descendants, permanent relationship to God as God’s own people, and the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession. Abram, which means ‘High Father’, is now changed to Abraham, ‘Father of a Multitude’. Then there is the renaming of Sarai, ‘Mockery’ to Sarah, ‘Princess’, and the promise that she is to bear a son. All this seems ludicrous, so Sarah laughs. It’s a paradox, but it reveals a surprising change.

In Psalm 22, the psalmist testifies in the temple to the salvation, which God has brought to him, and he exhorts all true worshippers to praise the Lord for his delivering power. The psalmist provides a meal, to which his friends are invited. The whole earth, those yet to be born, and the dead will accept the rule of God and proclaim his saving acts.

The Gospel passage occurs about half way through Mark’s Gospel. Here is the first of three predictions, which Jesus makes to prepare his disciples for his death and resurrection. But they fail to understand the significance of Jesus, and Mark is critical of them.

Engaging with a paradox stretches our mind and enables us to imagine things, which were beyond us. Here, Jesus stretches the minds of the disciples. Up to this point, the focus has been on Jesus' authority and power; now it changes to rejection, pain and death. The disciples begin to see what it means to Jesus to be the Messiah, and they don't like it. Peter tells Jesus off, but Jesus responds plainly, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things', which echoes the temptations, which Jesus rejected.

Peter is seeing the Messiah as a worldly power, which won't last, but Jesus is offering full and eternal life, which will last. He is talking about the standard of true discipleship.

The paradox is that the way to true life is to let go of things, with which we are familiar and which we think are important. It means taking up our cross, letting Jesus into our lives and following him. 'What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life' is significant, because it means letting go of power, accepting self-sacrifice, putting others' needs before our own, and being loving as we want to be loved.

Jesus calls us into a paradox; when we let go of ourselves, we find our real selves. The Gospel is the way of love, which will save us and others. The way of Jesus is different; it may well be costly, painful and sacrificial, but it is the way to true freedom, true love and true life. That is the paradox. It is the life, which will last for ever, but it challenges us about what we see as important. It is how we live that shows what we believe.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.