

SERMON LENT 2 24 February 2013

Genesis 15: 1-12; 17-18

Ps 27: 1-10

Philippians 3: 17 – 4:1

Luke 13: 1-9

May our hearts be open to you, O God, our strength and our salvation. Amen.

Letting go, letting it unravel... 'It', of course, can be anything but sometimes letting go and letting things unravel means a deep and confronting journey into who we have thought we are and how we engage with the world.

English sociologist and philosopher Anthony Giddens has talked about identity as being more than simply a trait or a collection of traits or qualities. It is, he argues, also about the way in which we understand ourselves, about the way we see ourselves and interpret our experiences over time. We knit our identity continually from our being and our history.

Most of us just get on with life. We play the cards we have been dealt, with more or less success, using the tools we have been given through upbringing, education, the society we live in and our own wits. Our knitting happens incrementally, day by day, month by month, building on the patterns of the past.

But there are times when things happen which cause us to radically reframe our understandings – good things and bad things. The birth of a first child, for example, adds 'mother' or 'father' to our self-understanding; the death of a much-loved partner brings a journey through grief to a new reality. The experience of war, or of public corruption, or of evil, or of life-threatening illness can cause us to reassess our beliefs and our engagement with the world.

And, encouraged by faith, we can also consciously decide to reflect at depth on who we are and how we see the world, looking for the heartbeat of the Spirit, for the kingdom of God within us. What are we taking for granted? What are we blind to? These questions can take us to unexpected places.

Today's Gospel reading, the parable of the fig tree, offers us some encouragement – rather brutally expressed, but encouragement nevertheless. Although I am wary of interpreting parables, the overall thrust of this one seems to be in letters a mile high. The fig tree was a symbol of the nation of Israel and here, coming straight after some very strong words about repentance, this parable seems to be saying very directly that the nation of Israel has not borne the fruit that it should and that it risks being cut down unless it lifts its game.

Can this really be what he meant? Well, this interpretation is utterly consistent with many of the other things that Jesus had to say about the religious life of

his times. He constantly criticised the religious leaders, calling them things like 'whitewashed tombs' – look great on the outside but dead inside – and 'broods of vipers'; and he chastised people for following religious rules without a sense of what the rules were meant for.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that Jesus thought the religious institutions of his day had lost their way. Some 1500 years later, Martin Luther argued that the church should always be in a state of reform – always looking to see the ways in which it was being unfaithful to its understanding of Jesus' call to us, unfaithful to its calling as the people of God.

The same is true of us as individuals and Lent invites us to look critically at all that we have taken for granted and to journey from head to heart. The inner journey is a journey both of adjustment and discovery. Jesus' statement 'repent or perish' sounds punitive. But it needs to be heard as a statement of consequence, not as a warning of punishment. It is like a doctor telling you that you must stop smoking or that you must lose weight. We often choose to be blind to the simple consequences of our actions or our attitudes. But we can so easily gradually, step by little step, adopt habits of thought, action and word, which lead us away from godly being, from dwelling in Christ. Assessment and adjustment are needed from time to time.

But the inward journey is also a journey of discovery, of allowing old assumptions and learnings to unravel and daring to trust that the voice you hear leading you, or the light shining on the path before you, both belong to God. The religious authorities of Jesus' day were, almost without exception, so locked into a particular belief structure about God that they could not respond to Jesus except as a threat. It is easy for us to look at them, with 2000 years of hindsight, and judge them for sticking slavishly to the rules and failing to see who was preaching and teaching among them.

But they were so enculturated in a particular system, and had such definite expectations about God and the relationship between God and humanity, that they could not see what was actually happening in front of them.

It is hard to let go of the structures and ideas that have nurtured us, to accept that some of them may have been wrong, or misplaced, and then to journey into uncharted waters, following a sense of God's call. Although it may not involve actually travelling anywhere, it will take you through wilderness, through doubt, to the edge of the precipice and sometimes even off it. Like Abraham and Sarah, you may find yourself living in ways which seem ridiculous to the people around you – why would you leave your settled and comfortable life in a fertile land in your old age to travel and settle ...where? ... Abraham and Sarah's journey is in many ways a metaphor for the inner journey. Like Abraham too we may have times of not trusting, of trying to make God's promises come true through our own plotting and our own efforts. Like Sarah you may laugh at the unlikelihood of God's promises. But the unravelling of our certainties is a sacred task. It enables us to see and hear the reality of God in the present.

Janet Morley, the English theologian and liturgist, wrote this Collect for St Andrew's Day, capturing the reason, the process and the fruit of this unravelling:

Christ, whose insistent call
disturbs our settled lives:
give us discernment to hear your word,
grace to relinquish our tasks,
and courage to follow empty-handed
wherever you may lead,
so that the voice of your gospel
may reach to the ends of the earth, Amen.

'Let it go, let it out,
let it all unravel.
Let it free and it can be
A path on which to travel.' Amen.

Sarah Macneil
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