

St Brandon's, Sermon for 28th February 2021.

Genesis 17:1–7, 15-16, Psalm 22:23-31, Mark 8:31–end

All Nations

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I've been following the Diocesan Lent course the last ten days, and my reading of today's scripture is very influenced by that, though I hope it will speak readily to those who have not heard any of the Lent course material, and not confuse or irritate those who have dipped in to some of the material. It's my take, to take or leave, and next week will be the very different voice of Revd Steve Muneza from Cranmer Hall as our guest preacher on this topic.

You see, I had no intention of preaching on racial justice, its really not anywhere near my area of knowledge but the way the Lent course material has been presented has got under my skin a bit. So when I heard the Genesis passage this morning, I felt I was hearing for the first time, the blessing of Sarai:
"I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

Its the same blessing as God gives Abram, but how often do we refer to Sarah's blessing?

How often do we call Sarah, the mother of Israel?

People do, it is out there, but in equal weight to Abraham?

Of course not.

Of course not, because the writing stems from the writings of a patriarchal society, an arrangement of society that is only recently challenged in Western thinking – if a century plus can be called recent: relative to three millennia, its recent.

Then I noticed I was feeling as though God had made a good choice in giving Abram and Sarai the new names of Abraham and Sarah: now, for me, they are people of more substance and stature – why?

Because I know lots of people called Sarah, I went to school with them, and Abraham, too, is such a familiar name: cart before horse, of course: the names are popular because of the stature of that couple in the Genesis story, but it shows me how much what is familiar from my experience affects my understanding.

And what is familiar to me can change:

I grew up in central London in a multi-cultural setting, had a Bengali boyfriend for ten or more years and was integrated into his family - but wind on four decades and I am finding myself gazing at ethnic minority people as if they were exotics.

Because they are, nowadays, to me.

They are not the daily or even frequent encounter in my corner of Brancepeth. And as I think about it, I realise its a loss, and one I'd hardly noticed; literally, some of the colour going out of my landscape.

It also made me realise that we normalise whatever is part of our landscape; who 'we' are, depends very much on what we are looking at; also, that a change is only a change for as long as it takes to settle into 'normal', and for stability, most of us do appreciate a fair amount of 'normal', not too many changes. Small changes though in the diversity of the images we use in

church – our resources, the children’s colouring sheets – in our music and words, might broaden our identity of Christians – what do they look like, where do they come from?

More diverse images might mean the ‘other’ becomes ‘us’, then ‘we’ become part of ‘they’, and thereby help us welcome the width of nationalities who do from time to time join with us.

I’m really conscious of pressing panic buttons, of the ‘do we need to change when we are who we are, and we are welcoming?’

Those are my questions, too, but hear me say ‘small changes’, hear me say ‘normalise and become comfortable with’, and hear the scripture’s words to us about nations.

God blessed Sarah and Abraham saying they would give rise to many nations.

We are part of those many nations; through Jesus’ work, we are invited to share in that heritage, and to work out that promise.

We Christians, and the Jews and the Muslims, all three are Abrahamic faiths – all three stem from Abraham and Sarah.

We are part of a very big picture – *‘all the families of the nations shall bow before him. For the kingdom is the Lord’s and he rules over the nations.’*

We have been ‘successful’ (it may not be everybody’s word) in taking Christianity around the world as missionaries; the Anglican Communion is a global, worshipping fellowship, which is wonderful but dangerous, too. It propagates the feeling that

we 'own'/head/lead the church rather than church belonging to God and his people.

The most compelling part of the lent course material for me, has been the witness by some of those people of God from different ethnicities.

To realise it is at the simplest level of not thinking, that I get it wrong.

That I deny that I too, am part of the problem when I didn't think it was really very much to do with me.

In this, I feel akin to Peter rebuking Jesus:

Peter did not accept that Jesus, who he has just identified as the Messiah – and Jesus has not denied it – is to be rejected and killed by the authorities; that Jesus, his teacher and friend is to undergo great suffering.

Peter is not prepared to accept what he is hearing, he is denying Jesus's divine call.

It is unpalatable and uncomfortable, and potentially dangerous to be associated with these predicted events.

Does Jesus acknowledge that understandable fear and empathise with Peter?

With the discomfort being shared by all his disciples?

No, he looks at them all, then, addressing Peter, who has spoken for them all, he rebukes him full-on, calling him Satan – the one who has tempted Jesus in the wilderness to take an easier route than God's.

How ashamed and awful must Peter have felt at that moment. Did it take him long - his fellow-disciples long, I wonder, to decide whether or not they were sticking by Jesus?

Perhaps that is why Jesus widens his audience, calling on the following crowd to listen to what it is going to mean to follow him.

Perhaps it was a phrase in common use, *'To take up your cross'*, because crucifixion was the standard practise for political offenders, and they were required to carry part of their cross to the place of their execution – all standard, humiliations for that category of offender, to that worst death.

Perhaps they understood when he painted this picture of following as if, and possibly actually, to their own death if they were to discover the real life. The alternative being to stay put, and thereby die for lack of striving to live this mysterious life that is God-given.

Are we prepared to take up our cross and walk with the humiliated?

Or do we stand with Peter, saying “you’ve got your story wrong, its not really like that”, because its not a comfortable truth?

Or do we stay with the comfortable position of being in authority?

The most recent contributor to the Diocesan lent course resource, spoke about the need for us to be prepared to let go of things, to undergo loss. Returning to the model of the patriarchal society, if the power is to be balanced up between male and female, there must be a giving up of some of the expectations and assumptions of ‘how it is’ - who is entitled,

what does equality look like - before there can be any real change. The shorthand for this is a recognition that all are made in God's image and all equally, are his.

What is it that we need to let go of individually, jointly, if we are to stand as just one of all the families of the nations that shall bow before him?

Amen