

Saturday 23 March 2019

Scripture: Micah 7:14-15, 18-29; Psalm 102(103); Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

*God does not retain his anger for ever,
because he delights in showing clemency.
He will again have compassion upon us;
he will tread our iniquities under foot.
You will cast all our sins
into the depths of the sea.*

This short passage has one of the little peculiarities of reading the Old Testament – the writer flips between talking about God and talking directly to him. (This also happens in the psalm, The Lord is my shepherd). It is all about God, though and this is a particularly beautiful understanding of God's love and forgiveness – with words like delight – and clemency – and compassion... and the images of casting all our sins into the depths of the sea. With words like this, we can, perhaps, tackle what many people refer to as Catholic guilt! With a God of such love, we are invited to trust and turn back to him whatever we have done.

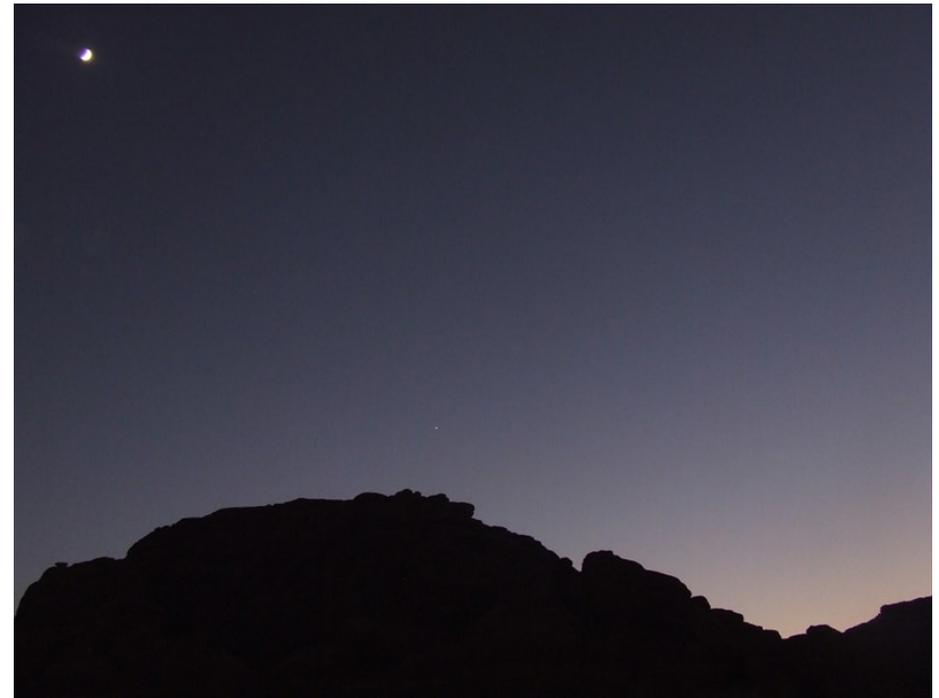
- What images or thoughts does this passage raise up for you?
- How does what Micah tells you about God help you to deepen and trust your relationship with him?

Read the passage slowly and prayerfully. Note any words or phrases that speak particularly to you and stay with them for a while – repeat them silently so that they sink deeply into your soul. You can also use them as a mantra during the day. Find some time to bring any thoughts into a time of prayer, asking the Lord to give you a deeper awareness of the extent of his love and mercy.

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GOD'S GIFT OF LOVE AND MERCY:

Covenant



2nd Sunday of Lent Sunday 17 March 2019

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Scripture: Genesis 15: 5-12, 17-18; Psalm 26(27), Philippians 3: 17-4:1; Luke 9: 28-36

God brought Abram outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteous.

Abram – who is later renamed by God, Abraham – is sometimes known as our father in faith. He is also revered by Jews and Muslims and, with them, we are sometimes referred to as Children of Abraham or members of the Abrahamic faiths. At the time, Abram has no legitimate descendants and his wife, Sara, is getting older with no sign of a child on the way. In the face of Abram's despair and, if you read the whole thing, his frustration with God, God takes him outside. Few of us see the stars as clearly as they can be seen in the desert – but in the deep darkness of the new moon, there are countless stars visible. To someone without even one child, the promise made no sense but Abram trusted to it. His reward – spiritual offspring in places he did not even know existed!

- What do you imagine it was like for Abram to be shown the panoply of heaven and promised that his descendants would be as numerous?
- When have you felt uplifted by the sight of a night sky or some similar phenomenon?

If it is a clear night and there is a chance of seeing stars, head out and imagine the conversation between God and Abram. If it is not, create the scene in your imagination and allow some of the awe and wonder Abram would have felt percolate through you.

Friday 22 March 2019

Scripture: Genesis 37:3-4, 12-13, 17-28; Ps 104; Matthew 21:33-43, 45-46

Now Jacob loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him

This is a long First Reading – and even longer if you read the full account (including the parts missed out in the version proclaimed in church). It starts out with an all too familiar scenario of sibling rivalry – with the favourite child evoking jealousy among his brothers. The Reading takes us through the discussions about what to do with Joseph – the brothers stepping back from murder but finding a solution that took Joseph a good long way from home. What they had no way of knowing was that their selling their brother into slavery would actually bear fruit when he saved their lives during a famine some years later – and brought the Hebrew people to Egypt from which, eventually, Moses would lead them to a Promised Land.

- Why do you think someone decided to keep this account in the scriptures – even if it casts some very important people in a bad light?
- What does the account teach us of how God can use bad situations to bring about good?

One of the beauties of the Old Testament is that we hear stories like this – and realise that human nature has hardly changed - and of how God does not need perfect people with whom to work. If time permits, set yourself the challenge of reading more from this part of Genesis – just enjoying it as a story full of twists and turns and intrigue. From time to time, remember to ponder what it teaches us about God and his love for the Hebrew people.

Thursday 21 March 2019

Scripture: Jeremiah 17: 5-10; Psalm 1; Luke 16: 19-31

*'Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,
whose trust is the Lord.
They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.
It shall not fear when heat comes,
and its leaves shall stay green;
in the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit..'*

In the full reading, Jeremiah contrasts those who put their trust solely in humans with those who trust in God. He is not saying that we should not trust people – but that we should guard against seeing people and material things as the sole reference points for our lives. The problem lies in the fact that, often, they can be easier or more attractive and, for a while, seem to satisfy our souls. Eventually, though, they cease to do so and we find ourselves compelled to look for more but still find ourselves unsatisfied. By contrast, when we place our trust in God – whatever happens, God will provide. Not necessarily easy – or convenient – but like something planted by flowing waters, we will always be able to draw on his life and energy for whatever comes our way.

- When have you put your trust in the wrong things?
- How do you place your trust in God – planting your life near the rich waters of his love?

Reflect today on this image – of a life that is dry and barren and always looking for the next thing to ease the yearning... and a life that is rooted in God and able to draw on its abundance and generosity. Pray for the grace to trust in God – even when it is tempting to turn to humans with their weaknesses or in material things which cannot last.

Monday 18 March 2019

Scripture: Daniel 9: 4-10; Psalm 78 (79); Luke 6: 36-38

*Daniel prayed,
'Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments, we have sinned and done wrong, acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and ordinances.'*

Daniel, like many people in the Old Testament, seems to equate God's love with being reserved for those who love him back and keep his commandments. Quite a few people in our day think the same – although Jesus went to great pains (literally) to show that God's love and compassion for his people is unfailing and unconditional. Perhaps another way of thinking about it is to think of God's approval. Rather like a parent – they can love their child utterly but not approve of bad behaviour. So perhaps with God – we cannot lose his love but can lose his approval!

- What is the difference between losing love and losing approval?
- What difference does it make to know that you cannot lose the love of God – even if you lose his approval of how you behave?

Think today about your image of God and how much you believe that his love depends on your behaviour. Ask for an understanding of a love that endures but does not approve behaviour that damages you or others – and the grace to respond to it.

**Tuesday 19 March 2019,
St Joseph, husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary**

Scripture 2 Samuel 7: 4-5, 12-14, 16 ; Psalm 88 (89); Romans 4: 13, 16-18, 22; Matthew 1: 16, 18-21, 24

The Lord said to Nathan as a message for David ‘Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.’

David is probably at his most powerful as king by this point and has decided – a little pompously in the eyes of God, perhaps, to build God a house. God puts David in his place – who is he to build a house for the God of the universe? However, God then does a little play on words – telling David that he will build a house for him— house that will last longer than one of cedar or even of stone. This is a royal house which will endure – and it is into this royal house that Joseph would be born... and, of course, Jesus who would be known as the Son of David.

- Do you think God was annoyed or amused by David’s presumption about building a house for him?
- What do you think Nathan and David made of God’s promise?

Joseph was not, as far as we know, a wealthy man but would have run his own business and made enough to provide a home for Mary and Jesus – and other children he may have had. We know he was a man of great generosity who opened his heart and his home to two very vulnerable people. You might like to ask his intercession today – as one born of a house of kings but humble enough to do the will of God even when it made little sense.

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**Wednesday 20 March 2019 St Cuthbert,
Patron of Diocese of Hexham & Newcastle**

Scripture: Ezekiel 34:11-16, Psalm 96 1-3, 7-8, John 10:11-16

Thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

Ezekiel was writing at a time when the priests and leaders of the people were failing in their task of caring for them and feeding their faith. Ezekiel prophesies a time when God himself will intervene. Jesus referred to himself as the good shepherd to echo this prophecy. St Cuthbert started life as a shepherd—and would have known all about sheep getting lost in the clouds and darkness of the hills of the Border Country. He would have readily understood the similarity between seeking those sheep out and looking for the lost souls who needed someone acting in the name of the Good Shepherd to gather them in and bring them home.

- Why might Ezekiel have seen a shepherd as a good image for God?
- How does this image of God speak to us in our technological age?

Spend some time today thinking about the image of God as shepherd. Imagine—or even find pictures of—the mists and fogs covering the northern hills of our diocese and reflect on how it would feel being lost in them—and the relief you would feel when someone came through them to find you. You might like to use Psalm 22(23) - The Lord is my Shepherd as your prayer today.

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