

## Sunday 4 March 2007: The Second Sunday of Lent

### Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord

**Readings: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Luke 13: 31-end**

*And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"*

Last weekend, an international rugby match took place in Croke Park, Dublin. I don't want to cause too much pain to followers of English rugby by dwelling on the result. It was actually the build up to the game that interested me. Croke Park is the home of the traditional Gaelic games of Gaelic football and hurling and is only being used as a temporary home for rugby matches while Lansdowne Road is being refurbished. In the build-up to the game, much was made of the fact that Croke Park carries with it a distinctive sense of what it means to be Irish, defined not just by those traditional games, but by events of history. In 1920, during the struggle for Irish independence, British troops entered the stadium and fired into the crowds killing both spectators and players. Against such a backdrop, there was much pre-match speculation about the prospect of an English team playing in that stadium for the first and of the emotions raised by the playing of "God save the Queen". As it was, both the team and the anthem were welcomed with courtesy, at least by the spectators – the Irish players were rather less welcoming, and the scenes at the final whistle spoke volumes about the history that had shaped that place.

*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"*

I don't think it's just those of us saddled with a naturally morose Celtic psyche, who are prone to ponder on how our geographical, sociological, psychological and spiritual spaces are shaped by the events of history and our response to them, both conscious and subconscious. Where we've come from, both as individuals and as communities does to some extent define who we are, both in ourselves and in relation to others. It shapes the spaces we create in which to interact and welcome others. Matter says R.S. Thomas (another morose Celt!) is the "scaffolding of spirit" in the poem from which we've taken our theme for Lent this year. And we might say that the coincidence of matter and time that is history, is what causes that scaffolding to be erected in the particular framework it is. The scaffolding may be a significant part of the shape we are individually and collectively; but it's not all of it, and what we do within that framework and within the spaces where we meet and interact with others, including God, is a matter not just of history but of will, and conscience and choice – and we might say of faith itself. We are the people we are, but we also people capable of change and growth and of making choices about the sort of people we want to be, and the sort of people we are called to be as children of God.

There's a wonderful contrast in today's readings between the story of Abram, struggling with the events that would shape him and his destiny, and Luke's portrait of Jesus, steadfastly embracing both the history that had brought him to this point and the possibility of what lay ahead in transforming and redeeming that history.

The passage we heard from Genesis is at first hearing completely alien to modern ears, with all its talk of animal sacrifice and apparently supernatural appearances of smoking fire pots and flaming torches. But look beneath the surface and you find a very human story, of a man who has heard the call of God, and responded to it in faith, yet who is still desperately unsure that that promise will actually be fulfilled. The framework has been created, the scaffolding has been set, yet Abram is still anxiously waiting for the assurance that space is there for him to enter and receive the promises of God. There's a wonderful series of exchanges in that passage we heard as Abram tentatively struggles to accept that God will grant him an heir, not just of an adopted slave, but of his own flesh and blood.

*"O Lord God, what will you give..?" "O Lord God, how am I to know?"*

Abram persists in questioning, and even the words of assurance that God speaks in response are not enough to prevent "a deep and terrifying darkness descending upon him". And the strange ritual described in the passage moves the encounter beyond words to real flesh and blood. *"It is matter that is the scaffolding of spirit."* Such rituals were used to seal a solemn promise or covenant – the two parties walked between the animals that had been cut in two, to show that whoever broke that covenant would face a similar fate to the animals themselves. When the flaming torch and smoking fire appeared between the animals, it was to signify the cost to God himself of entering into that covenant. Strange though it now appears, this is a powerful narrative of what we do with the spaces that shape our history. For me this story of Abram's struggle to receive from God speaks profoundly of that same reluctance within each of us; it speaks of our reluctance to welcome God into the spaces which have been shaped by our history, both good and bad; it speaks to me of our reluctance, my reluctance to allow the love of God to redeem and renew those spaces. *"O Lord God, what will you give..?" "O Lord God, how am I to know?"*

*And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"*

In Luke's Gospel, perhaps more than any of the other three, it is the city of Jerusalem and its history which stands symbolically as the space which Jesus is called to embrace and redeem. From the moment when Jesus turns "set his face towards Jerusalem" after his revealing as the Son of God on the Mount of Transfiguration, to his encounter with the women of Jerusalem as he is led to crucifixion, it's clear that the city represents the place where the ultimate purposes of God will be revealed. Read on from the transfiguration to the passion and you'll discover an astonishing drivenness about Jesus. Jesus had to go there – in some sense he had no choice if he was to be true to who he was. The events of history – Jerusalem's rejection of the prophets – had shaped this destiny. And that adds a poignancy to Jesus' lament over the city:

*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*

For Jesus knows that to redeem the city over which he weeps – and all it represents of the frail and sinful nature of humanity – Jesus knows that to redeem that city he has to enter it. He has to enter into the space shaped and moulded and scaffolded by a history of the rejection of God's prophets and God's purposes and redeem it with the giving of his very self. And in the book of Revelation, the vision of the new Jerusalem is a place that overcomes the sorrows of its history by the welcoming of God who dwells with mortals.

*“See the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.”*

Lent is a season when we are called to self-examination, both individually and collectively. Part of that self-examination is about acknowledging the reality of who we are, of the scaffolding of events joyful and sorrowful that have brought us to this point, and shaped us into the sort of people that we are. But it’s also about moving on from that reality to be open to the possibility of the new within those spaces created by that scaffolding; to be open to the challenge of change and growth through the redeeming presence of God who longs to enter into the spaces; it’s a season that asks us to overcome the fearful questions of *“O Lord God, what will you give...?”* *“O Lord God, how am I to know?”* and to be willing to receive from the God who longs to enter and to give; It’s a time for each of us prepare ourselves to say with heart and soul and mind: *‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’*