

St Mary's Church, Dorchester, Sunday 16th March 2025 i.e. the Second Sunday of Lent.

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Luke 13:31-end

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

I'm excited to be starting a regular Bible study group here after Easter. One of the reasons I'm excited is that the Bible selections we're given for reading on Sunday mornings here are often full of gaps. Bible study is a great way of filling in those gaps. It gives us a better sense of what it's like to read the Bible as it is – with all the joy that implies, and also the struggle.

The gaps in our Sunday readings often appear trivial. The Revised Common Lectionary, which is the formal name for the pattern of Bible reading we use here, often leaves out repetitive parts of our readings; or lists which don't add much to the story. Personally I quite like the repetition and the lists: they're quirky, and they remind me that the Bible was written by people with their own priorities – priorities which may be different from mine. But the lectionary writers say that we don't need to bother with those chunks of text; and sometimes they may be right.

That is clearly not true when it comes to today's readings. The bits which the lectionary has missed out of our Old Testament reading today are of great relevance to us. Genesis fifteen is not an obscure part of the Bible: this story has left a clear imprint on the mind almost every biblical writer; and so also on most of the people who have ever read the Bible. And our Sunday lectionary has cut some pretty significant details from this passage. The effect is to change the tone in a dramatic way. So sitting down to write this sermon, I felt I would be failing in my duty to you if I passed over all this without comment. Reading the passage in full points us towards a struggle with ideas that we are almost certain to encounter in our lifetimes, if indeed we don't encounter them in the coming week.

So, what is missing from our Old Testament reading? And why does it matter?

Up to this point in the book of Genesis God has made several promises to Abram [12:1-3; 12:7; 13:14-17]. All of these promises cover more-or-less the same ground: Abram will have offspring; there will be lots of them; and they will inherit the land of Canaan. Today's reading from Genesis fifteen echoes all of those themes. On top of that, Abram also gets to ask God for reassurance, and a

bit more detail. God responds first with words, and then with a strange dream, full of sacrifice and darkness and fire.

That is all in the portion of the chapter that we read earlier. If we only read that, we might feel a little unsettled by all the scale of animal slaughter, but the overall impression is of God's faithfulness and Abram's faithful response – it's a selection of verses to warm the heart. But there are four verses in the middle here which we didn't read; and another three verses at the end, part of the same story. In the middle bit God describes to Abram the harsh slavery which his descendents will endure at the hands of the Egyptians. And in the final few verses we missed God reveals – without any apparent squeamishness – that the promised land which Abram's offspring will inherit *is not empty*: it is the land of

the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites. [15:19-21]

In other words, not only is the land not empty, but it is already bursting with people, people who call it home. At this stage God doesn't spell out what it means for Abram's descendents to be “given” this land; later, in God's name Abram's descendents will attempt to kill every man, woman, and child who belongs to one of these tribes in the land. The twentieth century has taught us a new word for that part of the story. We now call this sort of thing genocide.

So this is not an innocent selection of verses. Our lectionary takes a passage which is deeply morally ambiguous and turns it into something naively positive. It is difficult for us to understand how a single group can both be the victim of terrible atrocities and also the perpetrator of terrible atrocities, all within the space of a few generations. It's difficult to understand that, and our lectionary writers apparently want to spare us that difficulty. I would love to say that there is no need for us to wrestle with this – that we can ignore the matter with no ill consequences. But if I said that I would be ignoring the history of the twentieth century and the history of the last year and a half of Middle Eastern politics. There is no such thing as a nation which is just a victim; there is no such thing as a nation which is just an aggressor. I would argue that that is the lesson of Genesis fifteen. This chapter is not just a lovely promise to an old man, it is also a warning.

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Lent is a great time to think about temptation and struggle. One of the struggles I see happening

across the world right now is the struggle between the appropriate love of one's nation, and forms of hatred which masquerade as the love of one's nation. The author I'm reading at the moment says that a nationalist is someone who “encourages us to be our worst – and then tells us we are the best.” A patriot, by contrast, is someone who “always [wishes] his nation well – and [wishes] it would do better.” [Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty lessons from the twentieth century*] Christians ought to be particularly sensitive to all this. After all, as Paul says, “our citizenship [*politeuma*] is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour...” [Phil. 3:20]. Christians should never feel too much at home in this world.

Unfortunately Christians have often supported policies of national purity and domination. We can find examples from the twentieth century of course; but right now I'm thinking of the way that Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church talks about “Holy Rus”: the divinely-sanctioned absorption of all Slavic peoples into a single pure culture. That's how he blesses Mr Putin's war in Ukraine.

Christians in this country have no special immunity to nationalism. I wonder how long it will be before nationalist politicians in this country try to use Christianity – or something calling itself Christianity – to justify policies of hatred: the scapegoating of minorities at home; and aggression abroad. Maybe the seeds of those choices have already been sown here. We must be on our guard against the misuses of Christianity. So we must understand our tradition better. We must look unflinchingly at difficult texts and difficult ideas; we must learn to repent and change; and we must make new friends, and be prepared to stand with them.

I'm talking about patriotism, “the appropriate love of one's nation”. Whenever the subject is love, Christians have something unusual to say. Patriotism is one of the forms of love which true Christianity respects, but always holds at arms' length. The person who embodies Love for Christians is someone who told his disciples that they must hate their own families [e.g. Luke 14:26], and who was intensely critical of his own beloved nation. Jesus longs “to gather [Jerusalem's] children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings” [Luke 13:34]; but he is frustrated. Not because there was anything particularly wrong with his own people; but because human beings are not at home with love in the way he calls us to be.

Jesus knows that the next time he visits Jerusalem he will be arrested as a dangerous political dissident, and killed. And he knows that that will always be the fate of those who, like him, have two passports – one of which is just Love.

Let us pray.

O living God,
reach through the violence of the proud
and the despair of the weak
to create in Jesus Christ
a people free to praise your holy name,
now and for ever.
Amen.