

Genesis 17: 1-7 and 15-16

Romans 4: 13-25

Mark 8: 27-38

It is not difficult as a parent to cause embarrassment to one's children.

Especially if they are of a certain age.

Suggesting, for example, that they might like a 'discotheque' for their birthday party and that Dad might like to be the DJ, that would cause embarrassment.

And, of course, any mention of sex causes embarrassment.

I rather enjoyed the other day suggesting to our 11-year old that maybe Mummy and Daddy should have another baby.

That definitely caused embarrassment, bordering on horror, I would say.

(And, just for the record, we have no aspirations in that department!)

But our reading from Genesis chapter 17 takes things to a whole new level.

As God makes an eternal covenant with Abraham, promising that Abraham will be 'exceedingly fruitful' and that he will give rise to a 'multitude of nations', he says that Sarah will give birth to a son.

The trouble is Sarah is 90 and Abraham is 100!

As good as dead, Paul says, rather rudely, in our reading from Romans.

And Sarah is barren.

It is surely a tricky one. No son, no covenant. God's promises become empty, hollow. And that's no good.

Abraham's reaction to the news that Sarah will give birth is rather lovely.

The relevant verse occurs just outside the passage that we heard.

But we hear in verse 17 that Abraham falls on his face, which seems about right.

After all, this is God who is speaking to him.

But then Abraham laughs, which seems somewhat lacking in decorum.

'Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old?', Abraham says to himself.

'Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?', he goes on.

'Reasonable questions indeed', one might say!

And as one of the commentaries puts it, it is as if Abraham's body knows what to do – he falls on his face – but his mind hasn't quite caught up.

Either way, it is clear that Abraham is at the very least uncertain as to how to take what God is saying.

We get a similar reaction of incredulity – although this time laced with outrage – in our gospel reading from Mark, chapter 8 as Jesus begins the slow process of explaining to his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo 'great suffering' and 'be killed'.

It is so not what the disciples had anticipated.

How can such a death possibly be of God, possibly be victory?

Peter has answered the question about who Jesus is correctly – it would appear – by saying that Jesus is the Messiah.

But then Peter shows that he has no comprehension whatsoever of what this means, rebuking Jesus for speaking in this way, prompting Jesus in turn to give Peter a dressing down.

'Get behind me, Satan', he says in that famous phrase.

(And in the Greek the language Jesus uses is the same as when he rebukes the unclean spirit in Mark chapter 1.)

So, two reactions to the ways of God:

One doubting God. Surely this isn't possible.

We see that in Abraham's response to God's promise that Sarah will give birth to a son.

And another kind of response, which we see in Peter's misunderstanding of the kind of Messiah, the kind of King, Jesus is.

Failing to grasp where Jesus' life on earth is heading, and, in turn, what this means for anyone who wants to follow him.

Rejection, suffering, death.

The way of the cross.

And we can surely sympathise with both these responses.

How often the things of God seem impossible to us.

Death will be no more. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

The guns will fall silent in Syria.

Homelessness will be no more.

Hunger will be no more.

Prejudice towards people who are gay or foreign or disabled will be no more.

And how often too we fail to grasp what a life of following Christ implies.

Or if we catch a glimpse of this – the glorious truth – we struggle to live it out.

We put self before others. We go after worldly things. We have to be in control.

I know I do.

The other day I was having lunch with a colleague and I chose my words poorly, they belied an attitude which was inappropriate, and thankfully I was put right.

And suitably chastened, a little while later still smarting from the exchange, I heard these words not directed at me at all but it felt as if they were.

'If it is not of God, God will tell us. If it is, grace upon grace'.

But can we live a life of obedience like this?

Trusting in God. Not looking out for self.

It is not easy.

But, just as Sarah did give birth to Isaac and Abraham did give rise to nations.

And Peter, impetuous Peter, became the rock on which the Church was built.

So, there is hope for us, the ones that Jesus came to save.

Lent, as we know, is a time of self-examination, penitence, self-denial and study.

An opportunity for a spiritual MOT, if you like.

But it is easy to let Lent pass us by, to pay it scant attention amid all the other pressures of life.

And arrive at Easter less prepared than we could be. And I speak for myself here.

So, can we all commit – even in the busy-ness of life – to do something however small to mark the season?

We need to pray for faith – for ourselves and for others.

Let us acknowledge the times when we have not believed.

When we have failed to grasp what following Christ means or have chosen a different path.

And with Abraham, let fall on our faces – even laugh – at the crazy promises God has made to us...

The God, who out of love for the world, sent his Son to die for us...

The God that gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

And let's pray for those things that do not exist.

And let us recommit ourselves this Lent to a right relationship with God and with our neighbour.

And these are not just pious words.

This is hard graft. Eye of the needle stuff.

Obedient love.

The kind of love which very often goes against all our instincts, fallen creatures that we are.

Not my will but yours be done – this Lent.

It truly does require God's grace, a leap of faith, trusting that Jesus points us to a better path.

And that it is the way to life.

Amen.