

I recall some years ago having a longstanding problem in my last Parish that I was afraid was going to end in conflict and pain, not only for myself but also for the individual involved – this was a person who had offered many years of service to the Parish in the past. Without going into detail, the matter resolved itself over a relatively short period of time and we moved on, remaining on very good terms.

I remember discussing this with one of the curates in Ballymena at the time, telling him of my relief that things had worked out so well. He grinned and said, ‘See, Kevin, God does answer prayer.’ To which I replied, with some irritation, ‘Oh, I know that – I just wish he wouldn’t take so long at times!’ I still remember Tom’s response: ‘God’s time is the right time.’

I suppose there is something of the thought of the writer of Ecclesiastes in all of this.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; *Eccles 3:1ff*

This always speaks to me of a pattern, a rhythm; without reducing ourselves to a blind determinism or fatalism, a God given providence setting a shape to life.

This came to my mind as I read our lesson from the letter of Paul to the Romans, one of the passages that is set to be read this Second Sunday in Lent. As I read this passage, it set me thinking about the Abraham story as a whole. This is a story of call, of promise, of faithfulness. God not only calls Abram,

he promises descendants to a man in his seventies. He also pledges his presence with Abram as he travels the journey he has called him to undertake.

Let us just look at the Abraham story as it stands. First of all we recognise the age that Abram and Sarai were when God first called Abram; if nothing else it meant that descendants, when they come, are going to be of the nature of a gift, of grace. Taking the chronology at face value, this episode stretches over a period of 25 years, from Abram's call when he was 75 to the birth of Isaac when he was 100.

We are presented with a story of faith. Along that journey there are times of great clarity and confidence; times also of set back, misunderstanding and doubt. It is a story that we could all identify with, with which we could see parallels in our own experience, our own journey of faith..

Abram, aged 75, hears and responds to the call, rejoicing in the promise of descendants. The years slip by and nothing happens. Ten years slip by; Abram and Sarai are left wondering – did they get it right, did they understand? For want of a better word, they decide to force the pace; Abram fathers a child through Sarai's servant, Hagar – and Ishmael is born. The couple learn that this is not what God intended for them; with that comes the confusion, the pain as Hagar is driven away. Ten more years slip by in our story until at least the child Isaac arrives. And all the anxieties, the fear, the setbacks, and disappointments of the previous years melt in the joy of the arrival of their long awaited, long promised child.

This is a journey of faith rather than one of certainty. A journey of hope and trust that the God who called, that the God who travelled the road with them would be faithful to his promise.

This is the journey that Jesus is inviting his disciples to accompany him on in our Gospel reading today. As he speaks of his own coming passion, he calls them along a path of self-offering, self-emptying sacrifice:

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

Mark 8:35

It is a call to travel a different road, with different priorities, with different goals. The path of trust, of faith is at times a more difficult, a more uncertain, a more vulnerable one. It is the path of the cross, of self-giving. It is the path of Abraham, of letting go of the security of self and entrusting our own plans, our hopes and fears to the God who calls us, waiting on him to fulfil his purposes in our lives.