

## **Trinity 6** [Proper 12 (C)]

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 28 July 2019

*Readings: Genesis 18 vv 20-32 and Luke 11 vv 1-13*

It is reassuring that the disciples struggled with faith and with the big questions. It is reassuring that they needed Jesus to explain, again and again. In St John's gospel, we find a wonderfully reassuring reply from Jesus: 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?' If Philip had a problem, after spending so much time with Jesus, perhaps we can be forgiven (and, of course, we are) for not fully understanding the mystery and wonder of God.

Jesus, the Word of God, shows us what God is like. But tension between certainty and mystery remains.

On the one hand we know God because we have God's own revelation of himself in the Bible: the gradual unfolding of revelation in the Old Testament that comes to a glorious climax in Jesus. We draw on the witness of scripture. We experience God at work in our own world and in our own lives. We use our reason and the traditions of the Church to develop our understanding of who God is and how we might expect God to behave and act.

But that's not the whole story. We are warned not to put God in a box – not to try to make create a God that makes us comfortable; not to try to make him like us; not to forget the distinction between the Creator and creation. In the end, God is God and we are not. Can we ever fully understand God's nature and his ways?

I believe that the Bible is God's unveiling of himself through history and through interaction with human beings. But that doesn't stop me being puzzled by those difficult and messy texts where God acts in ways that cannot be rationally explained away.

And we cannot ignore the uncomfortable fact that things happen that defy our understanding of a good or powerful God. If God is good and God is powerful, why do bad things happen to good people? Why do the innocent suffer?

In last week's reading from Genesis, we heard the story of the visit of the three men, who told Abraham that he and Sarah would, in their old age, have a son.

Today's passage, beginning ten verses on, opens with God's statement about Sodom and Gomorrah. But we have missed some important verses, in which we eavesdrop on God thinking out loud. God explains that Abraham has been chosen with the intention that he and 'his children and his household after him [will] keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice'. Today's reading is a remarkable example of Abraham doing just what was expected of him.

Abraham understands God as one who will act justly and righteously. That understanding emboldens Abraham to act in the way he does. And this is as powerful an example of prayer as we find in the gospel reading.

We are not given specific details here about the issues that caused God to be so concerned about the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. All we need to know is that their sin has caused great concern; that the outcry against them has come to God's attention; and that God needs to investigate.

The three men who have visited Abraham leave. Abraham is still standing before God. He asks God if he will destroy the righteous as well as the wicked. Abraham cannot believe that this is possible. Will God really do such a thing? Indeed, *could* God do such a thing?

Abraham expects that God will operate within a certain framework, that God will surely not destroy the righteous with the wicked or refuse to forgive. Abraham's question throughout the unfolding dialogue is essentially this, "Shall not the judge of all the earth act justly?"

But we are on sacred ground. We are confronted with the mystery of God. Each time, Abraham asks the question beginning with the word, 'Suppose ...'. God's reply begins with the word, 'If ...'. Does this imply that that God genuinely does not know how many righteous people are in the city? If so, that would call into question God's omniscience. Or does God know that there are less than ten righteous people in the city? If so, why does he play along with Abraham's attempt at bargaining?

And if that were to be the case, we might come to the conclusion that Abraham's conversation with God has no effect whatsoever on God, and God is less than honest in how God speaks to Abraham. Neither possibility is terribly satisfying. We have to accept the limits of what we can say with certainty about God, and what remains mysterious. But it is clear that God acts ultimately out of concern and care, for the sake of the righteous.

Remarkably, this is very much the same message as we find in the gospel reading, where we find Luke's introduction of the Lord's Prayer, when the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray. This text is a fundamental example of how to pray.

But what is interesting, in the light of the experience of Abraham, is that Jesus goes on to encourage boldness in prayer. We have found this in the Lord's Prayer, where we are encouraged to trust that God will provide for our daily needs. But Jesus goes beyond this, with his expectation that we will be persistent in prayer.

'Don't take "No" for an answer' seems to be what Jesus is saying. Jesus encourages us to persist in prayer, even when our past experience has left us wanting answers or when the result is not what we have wanted it to be. Persistence in prayer is never more necessary than in the barren times, as is so evident in the psalms, where we find frustration and anger and disappointment given voice.

Jesus invites us to continue in prayer until finally, whether we feel that our prayers have been answered, or we are still wrestling in the silence, we are ready to affirm in faith and hope, sustained by God's love, that "Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, for ever and ever.'

Our prayer is always acceptance that we live in God's kingdom, where ultimately his gentle rule will prevail.