

24 February 2013 - second Sunday in Lent

Readings: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Luke 13:31-35

I wonder how many of you remember playing the game “What's the time Mr Wolf?” There's the 'wolf' at the end of the room or the field, with back turned. And you are creeping up behind the wolf, freezing when he turns around, running away squealing when finally he says “Dinner time!” and chases after you.

I seemed to catch an echo of that childhood game in the gospel reading today.

“What's the time, Mr Fox?”

The Pharisees suggest to Jesus that Herod is about to turn around and yell “Dinner time” - and Jesus had better start running.

But Jesus knows what time it is – he has knows what he wants to be doing at this time – he is going about doing good, casting out demons and healing the sick, all in God's good time, and he is under no pressure to run away.

Anyway, what can Herod do to him? (This is Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee in the north of the country.) His destiny, his time, awaits him in Jerusalem – that's where his work will finish – that's where prophets are killed.

All in good time.

What time is it?

For us it's the 24th February, the second Sunday in Lent, the end of O Week. It may be the week of your birthday, or wedding anniversary, or the anniversary of another significant event - the death of someone close to you, the day you started work or retired, so many years since you moved house or town or country.

Jesus speaks of time not just as the marker of events, or the passing of hours and days, but as purpose-filled, time for things to be done, time to accomplish the work he is about. “Today and tomorrow” – that's the time for “casting out demons and performing cures” – and then “on the third day I finish my work”¹ (And here Luke uses the same word that we hear on Jesus' lips from the cross “It is finished – it is accomplished, all done”²) There is plenty to do, and plenty of time to do it in – defeating the powers of darkness and disease, bringing in God's wholeness, God's shalom, God's kingdom. Now is not the time to run away from that fox's empty threats – now is the time to get on with the work that Jesus came to do.

But there is a future imperative at work in this time too – “today and tomorrow and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem”³.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and he walks that way with clear purpose - “I must” is that little Greek word *dei* which is used again and again in the Gospels to speak of the things that 'it is necessary' to happen to accomplish God's purposes – it is used above all when Jesus speaks of the way in which the Son of Man must suffer and die, and be raised again⁴. The gospel accounts show the clarity of Jesus' purpose, and his commitment to fulfilling all that 'must' be done to show us God's love and to bring about our redemption, even at the cost of his own life. Jesus knows that his time is about accomplishing God's purposes, and he will not run away from that.

But as Jesus walks this way at this time, towards Jerusalem, he is filled with deep love and longing for the people. “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her

1 Luke 13:32

2 John 19:30

3 Luke 13:33

4 Luke 9:22; 17:25; 22:37; 24:7,26

brood under her wings, and you were not willing”⁵.

The eagle was the symbol of the Roman empire. Roman legions marched behind the eagle standard – proud, powerful, ruthless. The eagle swoops down from the heights and takes whatever prey it finds, and nothing can stand in its way.

“That fox”, Jesus calls Herod Antipas – that sly predator, destroyer of small birds and vulnerable chicks. Herod was ruler of Galilee, courtesy of the Romans, a puppet king dependent on the favour of Rome, and keen to advance the influence of Rome among the people.

Jesus sees himself as a mother hen, longing to provide shelter and protection for her chicks, knowing the threat that eagle and fox pose. There are many accounts of hens defending their brood from attacks by predators, and giving up their own lives in the process, or sheltering their chicks as fire sweeps through a farmyard, so that the chicks survive, protected under the mother hen's body. But these chicks are not willing to gather close, not willing to hide under the shadow of Jesus' wings. So Jesus laments not for his coming death, but for their coming destruction, the abandonment of the house, the Temple, and the destruction of the city.

What time is it?

Abram had concern about timing, and how fast time was running out. Was there time to accomplish all that God had promised?

“Do not be afraid – I am your shield and your reward will be very great” God said⁶.

“Yeah right”

Abram has some question about the timing of all these great promises.

Abram had left his homeland and his father's people because he had heard God's call – and God's promise that he would become a great nation and a blessing for the nations⁷. But so far there were no children – so what use would a great reward be when there was no one coming after him?

It's a question of timing – and time was running out.

In response to Abram's questions, God offered Abram an even greater blessing – descendants as countless as the stars in the night sky – and somehow at that time, there in the darkness of the night looking up at the glory of the starry sky, Abram believed God, Abram put his trust in God, Abram had faith in God. And God counted his trust, his faith as righteousness - as being in right relationship with God. It's not obvious that Abram knew any more, had any more evidence to bring about this change, to produce such faith – but he was willing to trust the one who spoke to him, who heard his questions, who responded to him in a relationship he found he could trust. God's first word to him had been “Do not be afraid”. One of the most common things that God says to people in the whole Bible – “do not be afraid” - and this is the first time God says it.

Do not be afraid – about the time.

Do not be afraid – to ask questions.

Do not be afraid – because I am committed to you.

The question of timing had not been resolved. God said blessing would come, even greater blessing: innumerable descendants and then the land as well. When Abram continued to ask questions, God's response was – because I am committed to you, in this relationship that has no place for fear. That's

5 Luke 13:34

6 Genesis 15:1

7 Genesis 12:1-3

the only answer you will get – my commitment to you, my relationship with you. And God cements this relationship of promised blessing by making a covenant with Abram – literally 'cutting a covenant'. Even as the sacrificial animals are cut in half, even as the fire passes between them, even in the deep and terrifying darkness of Abram's deep sleep, even so God commits Godself to Abram and to accomplish all that God has promised. In God's time.

Abram was still childless, and getting older. Abram still questioned God. Abram still had to wait and wait for the time to be right for the promises of God to begin to be fulfilled. But Abram was willing to trust in God, to have faith in God, to believe in God at this time.

What does Abram show us about the nature of faithfulness, of righteousness, right relationship? So often when people face perplexing questions, when they feel the anxiety of doubt and uncertainty, when they struggle with frustration and disappointment, they think of it as a crisis of faith. We can be tempted to think of faith only as unquestioning acceptance or silent submission, but when we look at Abram on his journey of faith, we see him challenging and questioning God's claims, within the relationship God had made possible. This kind of struggling with God is part of faith, part of the way by which Abram comes to the faith that is reckoned as righteousness. Abram's faith is a questioning faithfulness, asking God for more: more information, more clarity, more courage, more commitment. Abram questions God's activity. His questioning faith takes seriously God's presence and power in his life – and it challenges us to be open to God's work in our own lives. Abram questions God because he deeply believes God can do something about it. Do we see our questions about God as taking us on the next step in our journey of faith, leading us into deeper relationship with God?⁸

Lent offers us an opportunity to think about our discipleship in light of how others live in faithful relationship with God.

Like Abram, we also will have questions that will not be silenced as we try to walk in faithfulness to God. Like Abram, we can question God as part of our faithfulness and trust, as an expression of the relationship God has made possible.

What time is it? - It's Lent and through Lent we follow Jesus on the way to Jerusalem, today and tomorrow and the next day.

There is time now for the work of the kingdom.

There is time now to live within the relationship of God's promises, knowing that God's commitment to us was sealed not in the bodies of animals and birds, but in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

God invites us into that relationship, where our questions can draw us closer to God.

This is God's time, and this is our time to wait on God, to trust in God, to have faith in God.