

“if they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one”

In the early 1920s, along with countless other Brits, my great-uncle Bill, took up the Australian Government's attractive offer of cheap passage for himself and his family to settle there. The prospects offered looked good, better than what appeared to lie ahead of him here in England. I understand that the first few years went well. But, by the end of the 20s Australia was in the grip of a severe depression and circumstances for Great Uncle Bill and family became very tight and he wanted to return home where they could count on the family network to provide support and comfort in hard times. But, to do so would have involved finding a lot of money which they simply didn't have for the return passage and so they remained, my grandfather sending out money, when possible, to support his brother through the tough times. Great Uncle Bill and family never did return to England, hardship lessened as the economy improved, they settled down and his children and descendants are now fully integrated Australians although GUB he never lost the yen to return home.

My family story is not an unusual one of migration to a new land to a better future and so we can sense Abram's frustration in our passage this morning, the promises made to him by God – of vast lands and countless offspring are not being fulfilled. Back in chapter 12 when we first meet Abram, he has left his country, his people and his father's household to journey to the land God will show him: - “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing”. And Abram went with his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot and all their worldly possessions and the people they had acquired. And there have been adventures along the way including the rescue of Lot from captivity. But the promises are wearing a bit thin. Abram is getting older and he can see no prospect of a son and heir and he wants some certainty. So, he complains to God about it and, yet again (and if you recall a couple of weeks ago when Abraham challenges God not to destroy Sodom if there are but 10 righteous people there) God does not chastise Abram but instead takes him outside for an object lesson. On a still starlit night in the wilderness, Abram is invited to ponder the view, the countless stars and, through that, take in the magnitude of God's promise to him. It has the desired effect; Abram believes and the Lord attributes it to him as righteousness. Abram already believed and trusted in God in a general way, but from here on he believes and trusts in a specific way – that God will give him a multitude of descendants. Paul understood this when he uses the verse in Romans 4.9-12 in talking about those who walk in faith.

What will follow this passage is a strange covenant ritual that comes from an earlier tradition with fire acting as the symbol of the holy presence of God (Genesis 15.17), this foreshadowing the burning bush that Moses saw when slavery in Egypt was about to end.

We can take comfort from God's willingness to allow Abram to express his questions and fears and then give him very vivid reassurance. It is better to be honest about our doubt than to abandon our hope, that way our faith can be strengthened.

The Danish theologian, who I am sure you are all very familiar with, Søren Kierkegaard, said that 'life can only be understood backwards; but must be lived forwards.

Paul in this passage gives examples of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who have lived their lives forwards. They did not yearn for a return to where they had come from, but rather walked – by faith into a new and uncertain future.

This is frequently the Christian vocation but if the case what are our next steps? How do you know you have been called? How can you be sure? The reality of course is that we can't be but there are a couple of simple things to bear in mind.

Firstly, to have courage. Many journeys of faith and adventure with God never begin – because of fear. Fear of failure or of just being wrong is a strong disincentive to making leaps of 'faith' and that applies to a lot of areas in life; taking what appears to be the soft option, the safe path – suppose I make a complete mess of it, perhaps I'll be rumbled as just 'ordinary'. That is something I have got cross with myself for doing, particularly as a young adult, being afraid to jump outside my comfort zone. But what I have learned over the years is that failure is not the worst thing, letting something defeat you, is. And, that all experiences we have during our lives are seeds planted for future harvesting. It takes a special kind of wisdom and courage to face failure and defeat and then to try and move on from this. And I know that the timid and reticent young adult that I was now has a lifetime of experiences on how to face down and handle the doubts and qualms that still beset me.

So after courage, what's the second thing to bear in mind. Patience. The Christian life is often lived more in waiting and hope than in results. Our journey of discipleship is a lifelong one. It takes a long time to appreciate just how much God has called us to. It does take daily devotion to see that our calling is not about affirmation or success but rather faithfulness. Sometimes we are called not to win out but merely to with Christ by faith.

And Jesus – how does our Lukan reading help us here? Well, if we simply look at the final part of the passage, we are reminded that as Christians, all things are as yet unfinished. Because, as I have already said, it is a lifelong journey and we are required to be alert and ready at all times for discerning right decisions, movement and courage. The challenge for us is to be a continually expectant people, eager to have enough light in our lives to be able to see Christ when he comes to us in the frightened, hurting, oppressed and ignored. Unless we are ready to move towards those living alongside us now, dressed for action with light shining, we may well miss him when he arrives at the 'unexpected hour'.

Amen