

Sermon Lent 1 Year C 2019

It's a great joy to welcome today little twins Declan and Flynn who come here to be baptised. They are the fourth generation from their family to be baptised in this church. And their grandfather Leslie who also comes to be baptised alongside them. Today also happens to be the 40th wedding anniversary of Rhonda and Graham, married here and grandparents Declan and Flynn. Such occasions, of course, help anchor us in our family story. They help tell us who we are. I commend you all for maintaining this tradition. In our fragmented, isolating world, it is important to gather, reconnect to a place such as this. Because it so easy now to move and be scattered, to gather at a place like this helps you all to reconnect with the identity of your family. This church will be an anchor for you and future generations.

For all of us, it is important to tell and re-tell the story of what makes us who we are, where we come from, who we belong to. 10 or 20 years ago who would have predicted the rise of interest in family history and tracing genealogies? '*Who do you think you are?*' remains a popular TV programme. That instinct to understand our story can't be ignored. While so much effort and energy directs us toward change and future technology and innovation, at the same time there is a rapidly expanding industry in exploring the past, assisting people in researching the story of their families. While the pressure of our culture insistently presses us *forward*, there are also profound instincts to have us also *look back*. Indeed, we might say that it is impossible to move forward without knowing where we have come from.

Progress - stepping forward - is normally made by baby steps, rarely monumental leaps. We stand on the shoulder of giants. Everything that will come after us is built on everything that has come before us. In other words, progress is always anchored in the past. It is important to keep this in mind to prevent the arrogance of imagining that our age is superior to all that have gone before, or that we might cut ourselves off from our heritage without consequence. To know where we are going, we also need to know where we have come from. We cut ourselves off from our heritage only at our peril.

Of course, remembering who we are and where we have come from doesn't just happen. We have to work at it. We have to keep telling and re-telling the stories, because most of us are pretty thick and forget pretty easily. And in the retelling, we will probably do some myth-making in the process, but that's ok too. We also know the gaping holes people feel - the real psychological trauma that can be caused - when aspects of our past are denied or suppressed. We need to be honest about our past. And we need opportunity to tell it and explore it. Because, all of us, ultimately - whether personally or collectively - need to know who we are, who we belong to, what makes us who we are.

The telling of our story to remind us who we are and what is important to us is what we do in the church's liturgy. The yearly round of fasts and feasts help tell us our story. And because even Christians can be pretty thick, we need to *keep* repeating it. It is what we are doing as we now commence this holy season of Lent as we prepare to celebrate the *central* mystery of our faith - the central part of our story - in the death and resurrection of Christ. We need to keep re-telling it so that it becomes ingrained; so that the story *does* tell us who we are, so that it *does* become part of *our* story. It doesn't just happen. We have to work hard at it to ensure that it does happen.

The telling of story to remind us who we are is highlighted for us in the first reading today. The context of the book of Deuteronomy is Moses addressing the people of Israel shortly before his death and as they stand on the threshold of the Promised Land. Moses - the hero of Israel, having led the people of Israel out of slavery, and after 40 years in the wilderness - won't enter the Promised Land. So the book of Deuteronomy is set up as a series of long speeches that Moses addresses to the people reminding them of their past, reminding them of all that God has done for them, reminding them of all the laws God has given that they must be careful to observe, reminding them of their story and the covenant God has established with them. We hear much of that story rehearsed in the portion set out for us today. The fraction we also hear, '*My father was a wandering Aramean*' is thought to perhaps be the oldest piece of the entire Old Testament. It seems to stretch back to a memory long before the written record.

So, Moses exhorts the people to remember who they are so they can step confidently into the future, and move into the Promised Land. But Moses' words can also be the story we tell ourselves, that we can read into our own lives. Perhaps we can trace in our lives the times when we were '*once small and insignificant*'. But also, we should try and see *the wonders God has done* in our lives, to see when he led us out '*with mighty hand and outstretched arm*'. All of us are only where we are by the grace of God! It would be a worthy Lenten experience for us all to consider these things. As people of faith it is only with humble gratitude that we can progress in the spiritual life. Smug self-assurance that I've got it all together, that I am who I am only through my own merit and my own effort *is not* the attitude which helps us move forward. It cuts us off from the story *God* has written into our lives.

Christ too, in the Gospel, is also seeking to step forward. He has moved out of the years of obscurity and hiddenness in Nazareth, to emerge at the banks of the Jordan to be baptized. And - as we hear in the gospel today - to then be led into the wilderness. It is certain that Christ can only withstand the testing he experiences in the wilderness because of his firm anchor. He knows who he is. He is confident in his relationship with God. He knows where his strength and identity lay. Jesus is tested in the proper exercise of power and his trust in a loving God. They are temptations to taking the short cut. We hear this at the start of Lent to remind us that moving forward in the life of God is costly. No short cuts! But Jesus stays fast to his identity in God and the costliness that lay ahead. God must be allowed to remain God, and he must trust him.

Our culture - and sometimes even the culture of the church - tempts us with plenty of shortcuts, as well as to leave behind our anchor, to cut ourselves off from our past, to ignore our identity, our story, and where we have come from. Lent is a great opportunity for us apply to ourselves to hearing the story of our faith, and recommitting ourselves to it. Lent is a great opportunity to tell ourselves our own story - especially the parts we would rather forget - and offer them up to the healing mercy of God. We need to trust, as did Jesus, that we can only move forward if we trust in God and his goodness. And faith shows us that that trust does not disappoint. Amen.