

OT: Genesis 15.1-12,17-18

NT: Philippians 3.17 - 4.1

Gp: Luke 13.31-35

Clearly there are deals being negotiated to try and bring an end to the war in Ukraine but it's not too far a stretch to imagine that those least likely to benefit from any agreement may be the Ukrainian people and especially the Ukrainian President. The Russian leader wants to keep his land grab and have little resistance should he try for more in the future. The US President wants Ukrainian mineral resources and the kudos for ending the fighting, topped off with a Nobel Prize for Peace, if you don't mind. All Ukraine wants is peace, help to rebuild the devastation and to be left alone to live in safety and security.

Deals very rarely are so generous that one party is happy to give mostly if not solely for the benefit of the other party. What might look like a bargain on the surface, usually has a price to be paid. Dr Faustus comes to mind. The play by Christopher Marlowe is the story of a man who makes a deal with the devil in exchange for power. Finding himself at a very low ebb in his life, Faustus strikes a bargain with the Devil. He is given great power and thinks he can outsmart Satan but at the last, the Devil comes back for his price, the man's soul. In this case, evil wins out.

But the story from Genesis today tells of a very different deal, a Covenant made by God with humankind in the person of Abraham. *(God) said to him, 'Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon.' He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other.*

In those days, contracts were made by the sacrificial cutting of animals, with the split carcasses of the animals lying on the ground. The covenant was made when parties to the agreement walked through the animal parts together, repeating the terms of the covenant. The deal wasn't entirely one-sided. God promised him the creation of offspring as numerous as the stars, making Abraham the father of faith, from whom all Jews, Muslims and Christians can source their heritage. And in return? God wanted to be acknowledged, loved and worshipped. Not for his own sake but because in his infinite wisdom, he knew, knows, this to be the fulfilment of humanity, bringing peace, true happiness and a contentment beyond any human making.

So all looks well. As God promised, *I will be your God and you will be my people.* But humanity is fickle, it can be in our nature to look for a better deal, an easier life, something more to our liking. Time and time again throughout the Old Testament, the people strayed, forgot about God and went their own way. And time and time again once they found themselves in a mess, they remembered him and called out to be rescued. And this is where the Covenant made with Abraham differs from human contracts. When humanity repeatedly broke the deal, God did not metaphorically tear up the paper but relented and came to the aid of his people.

Until eventually, the Father sent the Son to experience the fullness of humanity but without sin so that by his teaching and example, Jesus could help the people to see how we can eventually return to be the people that God had intended us to be, how we can be transformed to reflect his likeness and to be set

free from the shackles of sin to live in eternity with God. As Paul puts it in his letter to the Philippians: *He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory.*

Why does God pursue this apparent lost cause so avidly, never giving up on humanity, even allowing himself to succumb to appalling torture and death on the Cross and then showing what we can be through the Resurrection of Jesus? Still we like to dance with the Devil from time to time, have our moments of thinking we are supreme, lose consideration for anyone but ourselves.

For all that he is almighty, God cannot help himself. God is love and it is his complete nature to go on loving humankind and always wanting what is best for us, even when we use our free will in such destructive causes. As the Preface for Eucharistic Prayer F says:

You fashioned us in your image
and placed us in the garden of your delight.
Though we chose the path of rebellion
you would not abandon your own.
Again and again you drew us into your covenant of grace.

Lent this year coincides for a large part with Ramadan when our brothers and sisters in Islam are fasting from sunrise to sunset. As Christians, we too are encouraged to practice self-denial, prayer and alms giving. This makes this an especially holy month as so many people, all descendants in faith from Abraham, all part of the fulfilment of God's promise when he made that covenant, when so many of us are turned to God in humility, in acknowledging our unworthiness, in giving thanks for his unconditional love.

Let us take every opportunity offered to us this Lent to strengthen our relationship with him, to deny ourselves and to be grateful for the many blessings in our lives. So that at Easter, as at Eid, people of faith can celebrate again the love of God, his steadfast adherence to his Covenant with humanity, the making of a deal that restored us to the joy of this world and the promise of eternal life.

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