

OPENING COLLECT

Almighty God, you show to those who are in error the light of your truth, that they may return to the way of righteousness: grant to all those who are admitted into the fellowship of Christ's religion, that they may reject those things that are contrary to their profession, and follow all such things as are agreeable to the same; through our Lord Jesus Christ, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

FIRST READING: Genesis 12.1–4a

¹ The LORD said to Abram,
'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.
² I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' ⁴ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.

Deciding for God should lead to a life of **obedient trust**, and this is a useful theme arising from this week's readings. In contrast to Adam and Eve (last week), who, given everything by God, were **disobedient** and chose to turn away from him, taking their destiny into their own hands, instead of living by trust, the C.10th. writer next cites Abraham as the example of **obedient trust**. We really need to read more of Abraham's story, as it is recorded in Genesis, if we are to fully understand this theme, but the tone is set in this passage. Abraham is given a challenge, and if he is obedient and trusts God, then there is the promise that God will bless him, make him a great nation and 'make his name great'. He will, then, be a blessing to all. He is thus called into a special relationship with God, but, importantly, **only so that 'the families of the earth' may find blessing** (verse 3b); a theme which J, the writer, often comes back to, as in 22.18 for example, when Abraham has shown his trust in the power of God, by being ready to sacrifice his only son and the heir to the promise.

SECOND READING: Romans 4.1–5, 13–17

¹ What are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.' ⁴ Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. ⁵ But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.
¹³ For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.
¹⁴ If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.

Paul picks this theme up in Romans, for here he is exploring how humans may be seen as righteous by God, when, to our eyes, they are surely not! Righteousness is not a question of moral perfection or doing a lot of good deeds, but of faith and obedient trust, which is at the heart of our relationship with God. Salvation is through his grace, and his grace alone ("By grace are you saved through faith" as he says in Ephesians 2.8). For Paul, Abraham is the obvious example. He did not earn God's favour, his righteousness was not achieved by works, but he obeyed God and trusted Him (4.3 cites Gen.15.6). That was why God treated him as righteous: the relationship was based on faith and obedient trust.

Epistle continued:

15 For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

16 For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, 17 as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations') – Abraham believed in the presence of the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

The logical conclusion to this, which echoes the Genesis writer, is that those who hope to inherit the promise (of the blessing of God) should also live by trust and faith, and that is an offer open to all, 'guaranteed to all his descendants' (v.16) and not just the adherents of the Law. In fact, he boldly asserts, true righteousness cannot be achieved by strict adherence to the Law (v.14).

Gospel: John 3.1–17

1 There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' 3 Jesus answered him,

'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' 4 Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' 5 Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.

7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." 8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' 9 Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' 10 Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 11 Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven

except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16 For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17 Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.'

And so we come to the story of Nicodemus. As a good Jew of his day, and a 'teacher of Israel' (v.10), he would know all about the promise and, indeed, be looking for the blessing of God. The God, who promised to make the children of Abraham a great nation, ought, surely, to be doing so, for they were working very hard to keep the Law and so live a righteous life. Surely they were due for a reward, and this was what the Messiah would come to initiate? Yet, if Jesus was the Messiah, then God was using a strange method to bring in his Kingdom. Jesus was asking for repentance, a fresh start, and asking this from people who had always suffered, and yet had tried to keep themselves pure, and so 'in God's good books'. So Nicodemus, a teacher of Israel, is mystified. The signs suggest that God is with Jesus, yet his teaching does not fit with what Nicodemus expects. Maintaining trust in God is not always easy as Nicodemus has to learn. It is a hard lesson if you think you've got it right already, and your understanding of the faith is challenged. However, as Paul says, Abraham believed in God and that was reckoned to him as righteousness. Belief and trust, faith and obedience- so how is your Lent going? Are you walking the right way and living by trust? Look at the opening Collect!

Post-Communion Collect

Almighty God, you see that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves: keep us both outwardly in our bodies, and inwardly in our souls; that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**