

25th February 2024, 2nd Sunday in Lent

Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22: 23-end; Romans 4: 13-25; Mark 8: 31-end

I think that for me, a highlight of the recent half term week was our youngest grandson saying through a large mouthful of banana sponge pudding with toffee sauce, “Granny cooks good....” and my daughter then promising to get that printed on a T-shirt for me. It will go nicely with the one that says, “Never underestimate an old woman with a piano and cats.” Having recently read the book “Falling Upward” by Richard Rohr which has been languishing on our shelves for literally years, I am informed by the author that our lives fall into two halves and that the second half of life embraces a more relaxed attitude. At my advanced age I must be well and truly into the second half by now, although he says these two halves have nothing to do with age. I think I may enjoy these 2 T-shirts far more now, in my late 70s than I would have done in my 40s. I’m surely in the world of “When I am an old woman, I shall wear purple With a red hat which doesn’t go and doesn’t suit me. And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves And satin sandals, and say we’ve no money for butter....” a poem inviting us to live life to the full, and not mind about what anyone else thinks or says, which is part, admittedly a rather frivolous part compared with Richard Rohr, of what the second half of life is all about. His first half of life is all about building an identity, and gathering around oneself everything that contributes towards and props up that identity – home, family, relationships, friends, a job, community. We want to be successful, to feel secure and to “look good” to ourselves and to others, especially true in present day society.

Most of us tend to think of the second half of life as largely about getting old, dealing with health issues, and letting go of life, but the whole thesis of this book is exactly the

opposite. What looks like falling down, a steady and inevitable descent can largely be experienced as “falling upward”. In fact it is not loss, but somehow actually gain, as we have all seen with those people we might call “elders” who have come to a rich and wise fullness of being. It is much more difficult to describe, being more of a spiritual awakening that can help us to think differently, as we become less anxious and let go of feelings of superiority, let go of rigid rules and inflexible institutions and let go of seeing everything in black and white terms. It’s more to do with finding our purpose. Suffering very often provides an entry to this second half of life, suffering, not least, because we have to let go of the first half of life. We must leave home. Father Richard uses the Odyssey as a sort of template. He writes: “the whole (Odysseus) story is set in the matrix of seeking to find home and then to return there, and thus refining and defining what home really is. Home is both the beginning and the end. (He quotes T.S.Eliot a lot!) Home is not a sentimental concept at all, but an inner compass and a North Star at the same time. It is a metaphor for the soul.” So if we journey through these two halves, we eventually find who we really are – our real identity, our soul in the eyes of God. But first we hit rock bottom as Odysseus did in Hades, and even Jesus “descended into hell” according to the Apostles’ Creed. From hell, the only way is up. The pain of falling is essential to the joy of rising.

In today’s world, the whole concept of failure or falling and its accompanying trauma, is to be avoided at all costs, so very many people miss out on this second half of life altogether. But over an extended period of time, a calmer and more contemplative way of seeing can come into being. However, leaving success, security and the feel-good factor is costly, and today’s gospel throws us straight into that costliness so unattractive these days. Even the clearly charismatic Jesus could not easily entice his followers with a graphic prediction of his impending suffering and the requirements associated with following him –

to deny self, take up one's cross and follow him. These words appear in all four gospels, so there is no escaping them for us or for them.

Mark's gospel is set out in such a way as to appear in two halves and today's story marks his halfway point. In the first half of the gospel there were 15 miracle stories. Only 3 remain for the second half. As the NT scholar John Fenton says, "Miracles are not the method of salvation," the method of one power being overcome by a superior force. Immediately before this episode came the question of Jesus' identity, "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter's identifying him as the Messiah, the Christ. Jesus is concerned from this point onwards with explaining the implications of the Messiah's role. This is too much for Peter who thinks in human terms of a powerful Messiah overcoming all other powers at the time, for which he earns a stinging rebuke from Jesus which leads to the proscribed method of salvation through suffering not miracles. Peter's reaction is precisely how Richard Rohr describes the human reluctance to embrace the second half of life, the human desire to stay firmly in the familiar comfort zone and not put so much as a toe into the required melting pot or crucible. This is the moment that "Falling Upward" describes, when Jesus goes on into that greater depth, now in touch with eternity – deep time as Father Richard describes it – past, present and future all at once. The disciples are left behind. Like so many of us they cannot let go of what has gone before – being with Jesus, being part of all the excitement at Jesus' miracles, being part of the crowd building towards the climax of "Who is this? Who can this be?" They don't want to leave all that behind. They don't understand. And for what? Self-denial? Carrying a cross, the appalling image of death and suffering in the Roman world? They are at the centre of attention with this charismatic man. How can they possibly let him suffer? How can they possibly join him in that suffering? This is what

falling upward involves: letting go of everything. The choice is between disowning self and disowning Christ, and that is tough, then and now.

By the time we meet Abraham in today's OT reading I suspect he is already in that second half of life. He has already, long before, had to leave home at God's command, and set off into the unknown. He is now old, by any standards, but he and his wife have reached a new stage in life where new names are required. He is to be the father of a multitude of nations despite his very advanced years, and God promises Sarah a son after a lifetime enduring the agony of barrenness. In his letter to the Romans, St Paul affirms Abraham as a man of unwavering faith who believed in God's promise despite his age, saying his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness. Abraham's standing before God was a gift not an attainment – it is by God's initiative, by God's grace and not of his own doing. Abraham's faith stands out because it is against all opposing considerations, all contrary appearances of age and barrenness, the kind of response too easily scorned in today's sceptical world.

So we see Abraham's life falls into two halves, before and after his name change, before and after the promise of a son. He had been building household and animals around him, moving from place to place, his identity secure; and now, after the sadness, the tragedy of no legitimate heir, he enters a new phase in covenant with God and in the promise and hope of a son and thereafter many descendents.

Silly T-shirts, clashing purple and red, silk sandals – all offer light relief and can be symptomatic of a shift in attitude, in reaction to others. During the last week, three things stand out in my mind seriously, not as light relief that have upset me (in a way that is probably not appropriate to one in the supposedly more measured second half of life), namely the ITV drama "Breathtaking" about the NHS workers in the early days of the

pandemic, with no PPE, no vaccine, and rules that obliged them to send patients back to care homes where they infected the inhabitants with Covid. The sacrifices made were indeed breathtaking, way over and above the call of duty; secondly the shambles in Parliament over the debate about a ceasefire in Gaza while people are dying in their thousands; and thirdly, and for me most importantly, the death of Alexei Navalny in prison in Russia. He towers above other people in the news, and although still a young man in his mid-forties, epitomises the second half of life. In his show trial in 2021 he stressed how he was motivated by the words of Jesus: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be satisfied." He did not quote the 10 Commandments with all their do nots that necessarily prop up the first half of life. He went straight for the Beatitudes beloved of the second half of life. He longed for a world put to rights. He could see the big picture in the deep time of Falling Upward. As Michael Bird wrote in yesterday's Times: "His faith convictions would not allow him to join with Patriarch Kirill in Moscow and condone the evil that God condemns, to turn a blind eye to the corruption, brutality and horror of a state that claims to be all-powerful." Rather than the opiate of the people, the article calls Christianity out as the catalyst to defy all megalomaniac tyrants in the quest for justice and peace.

Michael Bird continues: "For Jesus says in John's gospel, "Here on earth you will have trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world." Death is the tyrant's ultimate weapon, but the promise of resurrection means that God intends to undo whatever the tyrant has done." Resurrection renews creation, reconciles powers and puts all things to right. There is the Christian defiance against evil and Navalny had it in bucketloads. As Kierkegaard said, "The tyrant dies, and his rule is over, the martyr dies, and his rule begins." Peace, justice and the light of God's love will reign supreme in the power of the resurrection.

There is God's big picture, visible now to those who see from the second half of their life, the ultimate promise for us all. Can we respond in faith, like Abraham, as we too stand before the Lord in this Eucharist?