**Second Sunday of Lent Year C - 13th March 2022**

**First Reading Genesis 15:5-12 and 17-18**

Fundamental to understanding how the writers of the Old Testament thought is the Hebrew word ‘BERITH’ It was an agreement between two unequal parties such as the relationship between master and slave. The English translation is covenant or league. It was ratified by a ceremony such as that described in the reading for to-day. It was the forerunner of a sacrament, because it was the visible expression of an invisible contract.

To ratify a treaty or pact the contracting partners cut animals in two and walked between the divided parts, invoking the fate of the animals on themselves should they fail to observe the terms of the contract (see Jeremiah 34:18). Here Abram is in a deep sleep (the same word being used of Adam’s sleep during the creation of Eve). This may be because the covenant is unilateral and Adam’s contribution is passive. For whatever reason, only YHWH symbolized by the furnace and the torch passes between the pieces. (The furnace was the latest technology of the age when men were learning how to make iron tools and weapons for the first time. This gave the settled civilisations an advantage over the nomadic ones who were still dependant on the softer bronze ones).

It is possible that the birds of prey symbolize the forces hostile to Israel, forces that will be conquered through the faith of Abram and by reason of God's covenant with him.

At the Reformation, Martin Luther and his followers were right to highlight the truth that God's choice, on his side, is a sheer act of grace; and Abram’s role is confined to accepting the Covenant. This was one of the main planks of Luther’s theology and he was right to make a stand. Yet, not always taken into account, is the fact that the covenant is not just with Abram but through him with his descendants, the nation of Israel. It was not a person to person covenant, but a corporate one. (Notice that after the Covenant, Abram’s name changes to Abraham to indicate the new beginning. There is no difference in the meaning of the two names however)

The apostle Paul discerned the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham in the Christ-event and in the emergence of the new Israel, the Church (Galatians Chapter 3;6-9 and Romans Chapter 4;1-12). So, our salvation, is not just an individual or personal nature as some of Luther’s followers asserted, but is received as members of the Body of Christ in the world to-day. The Book of Genesis contains several stories of God's establishment of his covenant with Abraham, all of them variants of the same tradition. In Abraham, God decisively intervened in human history to create a people for himself. In Christ he did so again to open the BERITH to the world.

**Psalm: 27:1, 7-9c, 13-14**

The psalm serves as a link between the first two readings. The fourth verse begins with the words: "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the lord in the land of the living!" In the time of Abraham (1800 B.C.) the land was sparsely populated, but when Joshua came to claim the inheritance (1250 B.C.) it had been settled by many small tribes in city-states who resisted the newcomers. It was then known as Canaan or Palestine named after the Philistine tribe of Gaza. For Christians the ‘land of the living’ is the kingdom of God, the "commonwealth of heaven" of which the second reading speaks.

**Second Reading Philippians 3:17 to 4:1**

The writings of the New Testament refer to about ten Christian congregations in the Eastern Mediterranean between Rome and Jerusalem. This may obscure the fact that many more unmentioned towns would have had anonymous groups of Christians. The faith spread by contact with witnesses to the Resurrection of Christ. It survived and even flourished because it was different to its competitors.

The differences are what Paul has in mind in our reading for to-day from his letter to the Congregation at Philippi. He is probably thinking of non-Christians when he lists gluttony, immorality and materialism as unchristian, though conscious that these common sins may even affect the faithful.

Today Christian ethics are influenced by secular attitudes. We live in a world that is commonly godless and self-centred and it is difficult to remain uncontaminated. But, I think that this has always been so and was so in Philippi.

Even the early Christians were not without fault, despite special graces. Christianity indeed bestows liberty, but it is a liberty to know Christ and the power of his resurrection despite our half-hearted struggles to achieve holiness. It is the privilege to spend a life in God's friendship which leads to the resurrection from the dead. (Phil 3:10-11).

Despite the godlessness of the world around us, Christianity does not mean withdrawal from one's duties as citizens of this world, as members of the human race. Humankind has the obligation of labouring for a better world, and this by reason of the faith we have been given. The believer, then, must see this world in perspective and so use its properties in the best interests of the earthly city.

**Gospel Luke 9:28-36**

The story of the ‘transfiguration’ occurs at the end of the Galilean ministry and before setting out on the final journey to Jerusalem. Jesus and his disciples often spent time in retreat and it is historically plausible that they did so before the beginning of the end. But the occasion was understood and only recorded in the later knowledge of the Crucifixion and Resurrection. So the story does not tell us what actually happened but it tells us that what happened was what God had intended should happen. This is clearly the case when we realise the Old Testament links. The change in the appearance of Jesus' face is reminiscent of Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:29). Both occasions reflect the Shekinah (Glory of the presence of God). It is this feature that gives us the title for the story which through the Latin means ‘a change in appearance’

Especially explicit is the unusual word that Luke uses for Jesus’ anticipated death which is ‘exodus’ meaning ‘to go out’ Luke is deliberately drawing a conscious comparison between Moses leading the Israelites to freedom with Jesus leading his followers to freedom. Then, the presence of Moses, Elijah and Jesus in God’s presence is confirmation that the forthcoming events are premeditated. The Crucifixion is not forced, or accidental but intended from the beginning.

The Transfiguration follows on from Caesarea Philippi where Peter made his accurate, if accidental confession. Here, again he makes a suggestion, which is pointedly ignored, that three booths be built for Moses, Elijah and Jesus. In fact the suggestion is not so stupid. It had long been traditional to build temporary booths in the fields during the harvests. Moses’ people regularly erected tents for YHWH to rest in the desert during the Exodus. Peter was thinking of either prolonging the occasion or marking it in a traditional way. But what Peter did not realise was that Moses and Elijah were on the way out, and Jesus was to embody the glory of God alone. The transfiguration episode took on significance when the disciples looked back on it in the light of his resurrection. It helped them to realise that the glory of God was present in Jesus of Nazareth though hidden from first sight.

It is no longer possible to say what it was that happened upon the mountain – or even which mountain it was. Was it a vision? Was it a deep religious experience? I remember a Mass I was celebrating on the mountain commonly claimed to be the original. The coach could not get through the hundreds of taxis, and we were half an hour late for our half hour pre-booked ‘slot’ The crowds of pilgrims were outnumbered by the crowds of souvenir sellers of kitsch plastic figures and cheap rosaries. It was nowhere near what we would imagine as a dignified occasion. But then, that is exactly the point. The Shekinah is present in the most incongruous circumstances and it can only be seen by the most unlikely witnesses.

On Saturday 26th March at 10 am

In Saint Luke’s Parish Centre

WA6 7AN

Father Colin Wilson will give

an illustrated talk on

**The Turin Shroud?**

If you are intrigued by mystery,

then this is right up your street.