

28th February 2021 Second Sunday in Lent

Readings

Genesis 17: 1 – 7, 15 - 16

Psalms 22: 23 - 31

Romans 4: 13 - 25

Mark 8: 31 - 38

Friend! Come Closer!



Following on from last week's 'Thought', today's scripture from Genesis is another of God's covenant promises with a sign. This time it was a promise to Abram that, even in their later years, he and Sarai would have a family from whom God would create a special '*chosen*' people. This would lead to a universal family of faith which finally came about through Jesus. The sign was a change of name: Abram became Abraham – *father of nations* and Sarai became Sarah – *Princess!*

I learned recently there has been an increase in people wanting to change their names by Deed Poll. I wondered, briefly, what my choice would be but then considered all the difficulties it could involve – especially at this stage of life! I would however, be happy to share another name Abraham was given. He was called *Friend of God*. [James 3.23]

Lent, as a traditional period of preparation for Easter is not just a time for fasting and extra spiritual disciplines, important as those may be, but for deepening our relationship with God. It's an invitation to draw closer in our friendship with him in Jesus. Now that's a much more exciting, interesting and practical use of Lent.

A real friend is someone to spend time with – sharing interests – discovering things about each other – even growing to be like one another. Friendship with God develops through conversational prayer – talking to him; listening to him from the scriptures and hearing about him from his other friends. In the process his spirit changes our ways of living, our relationships, our thinking, to enable us to become more like him.

True friendship involves confidentiality and even secrets not told to anyone else. Some people find it difficult – even *creepy* – to think of God knowing everything about us – even what time we get up and go to bed according to the psalmist! However, if we feel uncomfortable with things about us which make it difficult for him to like us, he still holds to his covenant promise – *I know. I forgive you! Let me help you change!*

In today's Gospel reading it's Jesus who reveals his secrets. He wants to tell his first disciples what to expect will happen to him. He feels bound to prepare them, warning them about his imminent death and resurrection and all the suffering they may share along the way. In John's account of this moment [15.15] it is the point at which Jesus tells them he doesn't think of them as servants but as **friends** and he is able to help them understand – especially Peter who can't accept what he is hearing. Jesus speaks to him as a friend when he gives him a firm rebuke - *'Peter, this is the Father's way. You're thinking purely in human terms!*

There is more about our friendship with God in the 'Romans' reading where Paul takes us back to Abraham. His friendship with God is firmly built on trust. True friends trust each other implicitly. Sometimes Lent is thought of as a time to please God by cleaning up our lives and doing good things – with more prayers, acts of kindness etc. By doing this we aim to remove any barriers to our friendship, but Paul makes it clear that for us, as for Abraham it's all a matter of trust. It's out of this trusting friendship that good things happen naturally for us and by us!

So our Lenten thoughts and prayers give us an opportunity to come closer in friendship with God and closer to each other in fellowship. At the heart of it all we find Jesus, saying *'Trust me! I'm trusting you to enjoy and live out our friendship!*

A Prayer (based on the Psalm 22)

Lord, our God, you are closer than our dearest friend.
It is good to spend time with you
Even when there are no words for the desperate prayers we want to make;
When little children are brutally treated and abused
– hungry and gunned down in the streets of Yemen;
When the rich openly exploit the poor,
and the weakest are denied life-saving vaccines;
when our lives fall apart through no fault of our own ...

Surround us with your love and help us
to go on trusting you;
to continue travelling through the shadows,
knowing that you still trust us to trust you.

