

SERMON: 2nd Sunday of LENT
12th March 2017 @ St. David's Church, Exeter
Rev. Christopher Durrant
Genesis 12.1-4 & Romans 4.1-17 & John 3.1-17

+ In the name of God;
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

“Many people who have travelled to holy places
have become conceited as if they have done something good,
and thus, lose their reward”

These words, which I will try not to fulfil in this sermon, were written by an abbot in the 1100's concerning the growing popularity of pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The Holy Land is the area of the world we would call today the Middle East: 'the cradle of civilisation'. Today, the Jewish nation of Israel, and the surrounding diversity of Muslim nations, calls the Holy Land their home. The Holy City of Jerusalem sits at the centre of the God's unfolding drama.

In our first reading from Genesis, we heard God's voice calling to Abram (who later took the name Abraham), to leave where he was, and the familiar people he was with, and to go to a strange new land that God would show him.

In our second reading from Romans, we heard St. Paul teaching and reminding us that we are all descendents of the same Abraham. Through the grace of the God who originally called Abram to a new land, so we all share in the same promise of holy pilgrimage and destination.

This is no promise of a package holiday to be won like a prize on a television game show! A pilgrimage is not a holiday. Yet, on pilgrimage and holiday alike you will experience exciting and perhaps scarily new cultures. You will taste delicious and surprising foods. You will admire impressive architecture and historical ruins. You will meet people who smell, look and behave in alien ways. This richness of travel is both the rest and exhilaration of going away. A pilgrimage is all these things and more. A pilgrimage is also about 'retreat' and 'intention'. Listen for these words later...

In our Gospel reading from John, we heard how Nicodemus sought Jesus out; how Nicodemus asked questions of Jesus, but then he could not understand or believe Jesus' answers. We know that Nicodemus was an important and learned religious Jewish man. He was most courageous in recognising his God was at work in Jesus Christ. Although bewildered, even incredulous when he heard Jesus' replies – "how can a man crawl back inside his mother's womb to be born a second time?" – Nicodemus was always faithful, and loyally persistent in seeking God in Jesus. Remember that the writer of the

Gospel of John places Nicodemus at the end of his narrative, at the crucifixion. It is Nicodemus who helps lift Jesus' dead weight into the tomb. Nicodemus' journey into God began in the Gospel we heard today.

Just as yours can.

I have been to the Holy Land twice. Once about this time last year with +Robert, +Sarah, and my fellow curates. And once almost 10 years ago with my wife, and a church community led by the Preb. Alistair Wheeler of Bath and Wells.

With my father-in-law Alistair I now offer you, the parish of St. David's, the opportunity of pilgrimage with us to the Holy Land in April 2018. Alistair is here today to worship with us and to talk with you over coffee following this service (wave). Glossy brochures with the itinerary and costs are freely available. Please pick one up and take a look. Come along to the parish rooms next Monday, Monday 20th March at 19:30 for our launch event. This event will be a gentle night of introduction for all those who may be interested at this early stage.

We have heard stories of meaning from the book of Genesis, and from St. Paul and St. John – I will now tell you a few pilgrimage stories of meaning to me:

Jerusalem

Like Nicodemus, I too walked the cobbled streets of the old town of Jerusalem on my first pilgrimage. Early one morning I walked to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre: the church constructed over the site of Jesus' crucifixion and entombment – the very place of that first Easter morning. The old and devout Muslim family who look after the keys to the church opened the big wooden doors as I waited with the sun. (As the Christian denominations who share the church are always cat-fighting amongst themselves, the keys have long been held by Muslims to help keep the peace!) I felt the air rush over me, and I entered. I was the alone in this most majestic place.

Surrounded by the company of Him and of His history that changed the world, I began to search for questions in that scented light.

On my second pilgrimage, I came with a list of intentions. This time, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was thronged with people. It was almost noon. We entered through one of the roof doors, passing the darkly cryptic Coptic chapel. I weaved my way through the jostling crowds to the stone slab on which Jesus' dead body was laid. I placed my Bible on the stone as is the Orthodox tradition and prayed for the repose of the souls of all those people who had died in this parish since my ordination. I stood up, and weaved my way again into the tomb of Our Lord. Walking on my knees I followed the pilgrim ahead of me into the inner chamber. I prayed there for the church of

St. David (and the church of St. Michael) – I prayed at the site of resurrection for you. On emerging, I weaved through the crowds again to the tiny Orthodox Chapel perched beneath 19th century British steel girders to buy thin beeswax candles. With tenderness, I lit these around the empty tomb and prayed the prayers that had been entrusted to me by those I left behind in England. I blew out the candles, and placing them in my jacket pocket, I began my journey home.

We are all people of stories, called to journey through Lent, to change throughout life with God, or else be fitful and dissatisfied. Part of that journey for me and for many is to walk where God walked, see what He saw, taste what He tasted, weep over what saddens Him still, and to meet the people of the land He promised to all His descendants.

Come on *retreat* with me, with Alistair, and with each other, into the reality of God on our 2018 Holy Land Pilgrimage.

Come with *intensions* to give thanks and offer intercession, both for yourself and for others.

Have courage and take the risk, like both Abram and Nicodemus before you, to come into the presence of God the way and in the

land He has chosen. To spent time with the challenge and comfort of Him in the very place of His promise.

Amen.