

**The Second Sunday in Lent**  
*St Thomas, Salisbury, 2024.*

*Genesis 17:1-7, 15, 16*  
*Romans 4:13-25*  
*Mark 8:31-38*

“For this reason it depends on faith, in order the promise may rest on hope”.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

St Paul can be quite hard work. And I think our second reading this morning is a good example of that. Paul has a very distinct style, one that doesn't seem particularly concerned with full stops or paragraph breaks (there are of course none of those in the original anyway!), so you get these great long chunks where he is trying to express something quite important, often by the repetition of important words or phrases. He keeps using the word 'reckoned' in the passage we just heard, for example. And there is a risk that we phase out a bit when we hear passages like that, regardless of the expertise of the reader. As I'm sure I've told you before, one of the members of the youth group Emma and I used to lead in my curacy parish famously said, 'Paul? 'E says too much!'

But we are now a week-and-a-half into our Lenten journey, a journey that, as I mentioned a fortnight ago, starts off with this great wide vista of the wilderness that we heard about last week, and slowly, over the course of this holy season, it's like we move from a wide-angle camera lens with the entire desert in it, to sharp focus on the Cross. We are heading for Good Friday, and the starkness of Christ's crucifixion.

But every week, almost every day in our readings actually, we begin to build up an understanding of what the Cross is doing, and how our lives, as people who aspire to be more like Christ, ourselves slowly become more Cross-shaped. More, if you like, cruciform.

And of course, in our gospel reading this morning the phrase that I guess the lectionary compilers wanted us to notice most of all was the words of our Lord to the disciples: 'if any one wants to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their Cross, and follow me.' And we just sung about it too, in Charles Everest's lovely hymn.

But what might taking up our Cross mean? What are we actually supposed to do?

And that's where St Paul comes in. In the passage that we just heard, Paul is trying to explain the relationship between what Jesus did, and what we do. What has Jesus carrying *his* Cross got to do with us carrying ours? What does a Christian life look like?

And Paul wants to stress - and this of course is one of his absolutely central themes, and one of the most important things that the Protestant Reformation wanted to remind us of - he wants to stress that all of this is about grace. I began this sermon with those words from verse 16 of chapter 4 of Paul's letter to the Romans: 'for this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants.'

The whole of our response to God depends on faith. That is all that is required. This is not a transaction. As I've said many times, God is not a vending machine, and neither is Christianity.

You don't chuck a quid in the top, and get a lovely creamy bar of salvation flopping into the tray at the bottom. What is required of us, what is invited of us, is a *response of faith*, to an *act of God* which Paul goes on to describe as a promise resting on grace, and being guaranteed to the descendants of Abraham.

Okay, that's a lot of technical language, and I don't blame you if your mind is starting to get a bit frazzled. But here's the thing:

What Paul is trying to say is that this is a paradox. Faith and certainty *can* coexist together.

When I worked down at the pointy building, I used to choose the hymns, and I used to select Stuart Townend's wonderful Easter hymn 'See, what a morning' a couple of times every year. I think we sing it here too. And it has a line in it that really provoked one of the Men of the choir. The line reads, 'One with the Father, Ancient of Days, through the Spirit who clothes faith with certainty.' And it bothered him so much that he came to see me after the service, and we walked around Choristers' Green - well he walked, I rolled - and we tried to unpack that sentence. Because he was saying, not unreasonably, 'look Tom, the whole point about having faith in something is that you can't be certain. Faith is different from certainty. It's risky. You might be wrong.' And that is a perfectly reasonable point.

But the key to this, I think what St Paul is saying about the nature of faith, and actually the nature of grace, which are the two words he uses in that verse with which I began - faith and grace - is that certainty is not necessary (possibly not even possible) on our side, but it is guaranteed on *God's* side. Certainty is guaranteed on God's side. I'll just read that verse from the second reading again: 'for this reason it depends on

faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed.'

Our salvation is shaped on God's side. Our salvation is shaped on God's side. Quite a lot of reflection has gone on over the years about exactly what Joseph and his son Jesus might have made in their carpenters' shop, and quite a lot of devotional material focuses on the fact that it may even have been that the Romans employed Joseph to make crosses. Could Christ have made his own Cross? It's a lovely devotional thought.

Our salvation is shaped on God's side, because of the Cross. Because of this act of what appears to be complete lunacy, but is actually an enormous love letter. That's why Jesus gets so stropky with Peter in our gospel reading. Peter doesn't grasp that Jesus doesn't need protecting from what is going to happen. What is going to happen is the key to the puzzle. Everything is 'round the other way. By losing his life, Christ will save ours. Our salvation is shaped on God's side, on the Cross, in wood and nails, that is the point of guarantee, the moment of grace upon which promise of a bigger world to live in rests. Our personal crosses, which we each bear at various points, share a family likeness with *the* Cross. Because they are shaped by the hand of the same master craftsmen. And that cross looks like defeat. It looks like failure. It looks like foolishness. It looks like weakness. But as we will hear next week, God weakness is stronger human strength, and God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom.

I love the idea that Jesus might have made Crosses in Joseph's Carpenter's shop. It's probably just a bit of clever piety. What is certain is that Christ shapes, planes, smooths and makes us beautiful on the workbench of his Cross. All we have to do is to present ourselves at his table, at his workbench, to use the words of

one of my favourite Lenten prayers, we present ourselves  
'rough-hewn', with, if we're lucky, just enough faith, but almost  
no certainty, and by the guarantee of the grace of the Cross,  
Jesus, the master carpenter, works us with his plane, and his  
lathe, and his sandpaper, and his carpenter's square, and, in the  
words of the Good Friday hymn, makes us good. And then of  
course we find that our own crosses are easier to bear, because  
we are not shouldering them alone, but sharing the load with the  
one whose certainty carries our faith.

Let us pray:

O Master Carpenter of Nazareth,  
who on the Cross in wood and nails wrought our whole  
salvation;  
wield well, we pray thee, thy tools in this thy workshop,  
that we who come to thy bench roughhewn,  
May by thy mercy be fashioned into a truer beauty,  
and a greater usefulness,  
for we ask it in thy name. Amen.