

The Sixth Sunday after Trinity (Proper 12)
St Thomas, Salisbury, 2022

Genesis 18:20-32
Colossians 2:6-19
Luke 11:1-13

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

With supposed retirement from public ministry in the Church of England comes the promise of very many more lazy days at the cricket. And by large, the present few months notwithstanding, that has indeed been my experience of retirement. Going to watch my beloved Hampshire, or sitting in the garden and listening to the extraordinary rollercoaster ride that is the fortunes of the English men's cricket team. Just at the moment that you are rejoicing they collapse in a heap. Just when you are swearing that you will never listen to them again because of what it is doing to your nerves, they do something extraordinary.

With retirement comes also a pension which is not sufficient for me to be able to afford Sky or BT sports (other providers of television content are available). So I can't actually watch England. I am dependent on the highlights package. And the highlights package gives you basically everything you need to know if you're not able to watch the whole thing.

I reckon that our three readings this morning, this Sixth Sunday after Trinity, are basically a highlights package of Scripture. If you only had these three passages, you could probably glean most of the vital doctrine, most of the message about Christ, and about salvation. If the proverbial alien came down to earth and only had four minutes in which you could share the whole

weight and breadth of Scripture, with these three passages you could get a fair way down the road I think.

Three completely different genres of course: we have a chunk of the book of Genesis, sort of history, sort of allegory, setting the scene for everything that is to come. We have verses from St Paul's letter to the Colossians: a letter to a particular people at a particular time in the very early stages of the formation of the church. And we have part of the Luke's version of the teaching of Christ which includes that gleaming, shining gem of a gift to us: the Lord's Prayer.

Let's start with Colossians. And actually the very first verse of today's reading: "as you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him." Or, in the slightly more lyrical version of the Bible that I use most of the time at home, "as therefore you have received Jesus Christ the Lord, walk ye in him."

And actually I think that single verse is the edited highlights of the section that we heard read out this morning, which is itself the edited highlights of the letter of Paul to the Colossians.

Two things: One: you have received the Lord. Two: Walk in him. Two deep truths of our discipleship there. The first one is that we have received a gift. We haven't bought it, we haven't earned it, we haven't thought our way into it, it is just a gift. Paul is talking about Christmas. He is talking about Easter. He is talking about the Font. A bit later on in the passage we heard he says, "when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God." There is a transformation at the waters of the font, because nothing is the same afterwards. And the waters of the font are a symbol, a

sacrament, of Good Friday and Easter Day. You have received Jesus Christ the Lord.

So we remember that this is all gift. This is the reception of mercy. Which is of course what that little section of Genesis is about. It is trying to teach us about God's mercy. So we have this slightly stylised exchange between Abraham and God: 'if you can find fifty righteous people, will you spare the city?' 'Yes, yes I will'. 'Ah yes, but what about if there are only forty-five?' 'Hmm... Forty-five?... Yes okay, if there are forty-five I will be merciful'. 'Ah, but hang on a minute, but what if there only forty...' And so on. The passage is about mercy. And about the fact that God is always ready to be a little bit more generous than we can ever imagine that he might be. That grace is always broader, wider and more all-encompassing than our wildest dreams. There's a passage elsewhere in St Paul where he says, 'where sin abounded, grace super-abounded'.

So we are the recipients of the gift. But then going back to that verse from Colossians, the second half of it is, "walk ye in him."

You've got to do something with this gift. You have to keep walking. Or rolling. Here's the bit where the hymn that we have just sung kicks in: "not for ease that prayer shall be, but for grace that we may ever live our lives courageously."

We are called to be courageous with this gift. We are called to believe that we have work to do. And Paul uses the image of the body, as he does of course in several other places in his writing, to describe this. We have to take up our place. We need to hold fast to the head of the body, Jesus, and discern, work out, what our place within that body might be, which ligament or sinew might you be? What is the work to which God calls you, in response to this free gift?

The lifelong adventure of faith is that vocational discernment. To what is it that Christ is calling you? To what is it that Christ is calling me?

Am I a shoulder joint? Or a big toe? Or a kneecap? The other way that Paul often describes the church is like a farm or a garden where we grow together, each with our different fragrances, colours, and fruits. Making up the meadow, or the vineyard, or the tree on whose branches even angels can flutter down and rest.

And then the gospel. Well the Lord's Prayer is, for certain, the edited highlights of Christ's teaching. It is the liturgy that comes directly from his mouth, together with that that we will hear Kelvin say at the altar in a few moments time. And if you haven't done a sort of 50,000 mile points and plugs service of your prayer life recently, why not revisit the Lord's Prayer, and make sure you are saying it regularly, and savouring every one of those petitions within it. Everything is here: God's holiness, our need, yearning for the kingdom, God's provision in daily bread, forgiveness, deliverance. It's the gospel in seven lines.

And the daily bread is the way by which we continue to walk in Christ. The sacrament of the altar of course most especially, but all of God's abundant provision to us. St Cyprian of Carthage, writing in the third century, said this: "we ask then, that Christ our bread be given us daily, so that we may abide in and live by Christ."

None of us have to pay to access God. He is not like Sky Sports. And our Scripture is an extraordinary and beautiful gift, and one that we should revel in, immerse ourselves in, swim around in like a lovely swimming pool. But highlights packages are no bad thing, and I commend you all three of our readings today as

exactly that. And all three of them are pointing to this key message: God has given us a gift, because he is so much more merciful than we can possibly imagine. We receive that gift by walking in him: born at the font, nourished by our daily bread, taking our place in the body, antennae always twitching as to how we respond, in our own context, our own place, to that extraordinary gift of grace. Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be given unto you. Alleluia.