



28th February 2021  
The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent  
Sermon – St James's Piccadilly  
The Revd Dr Mariama Ifode-Blease  
**'On the Eve of Something Better'**

*May I speak in the name of the Triune God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*

It has been a really intense two weeks. Work has been hectic, with juggling several workstreams and a recruitment cycle to fill a vacancy in my team. Reading CVs and Cover Letters, trying to honour each application, the dreams and hopes held within them, alongside the pressures of not having quite enough time, and trying to ensure a fair and transparent process, discerning who meets the essential criteria, sometimes regardless of how their candidacy was presented, has been hard. And there has been too the privilege of the people I have been called to carry, members of our congregation and friends facing the interruptions of death and ill-health to their plans and to their desires. Lent has focused my mind on prayer, mainly for others and their needs, but also on the quiet call of the season to resist, not an ever-increasing amount of crisps, red wine or dark chocolate, but something altogether more serious.

The trademark of Lent is a call to resistance, to resist pinning our hopes on what we can see, and instead trust in what we cannot see. And that is simply because we are on the eve of something better. Wading through candidates' applications can be exhausting but I know its reward will be a new and engaged colleague and a sharing

of the workload. Praying can sometimes feel as if we are speaking into a void, but again I believe that our voices are received and held, and honoured. God listens and God understands.

In the reading from Genesis 17 this morning, we note that, at the heart of it, God is simply saying to Abraham and Sarah that they are on the eve of something better. What kind of God, you may ask, waits 99 years to lift an unknown pensioner onto the national and global stage for his fundraising efforts, receiving military and civilian honours a year before the end of his life? What kind of God, you may ask, waits 99 years for a farmer, shepherd, landowner to give him another son? At 99 years of age, and with the longing for a child piercing his wife's, Sarah's, being, I am not sure that either Abraham or Sarah would have felt that they were on the eve of something better, but it may have been a comfort to hear God's voice. God renames them both, and speaks to Sarah's soul by saying that she will become a mother, whether she believes it or not. There is something wonderful and yet deeply unnerving about God telling it like it is, like it really is. As humans we can say, "oh, wow, this is a mystery I do not understand", or say "yeah right, whatever God", or give a response somewhere in between.

In the Gospel reading today, instead of saying "you, my dear disciples are on the

eve of something better”, Jesus tells his followers something like this “you know this journey we are on together? Well, it’s going to continue to be like this, only much worse.” After feeding the 4,000, rebuking the Pharisees who had asked for a sign, and healing the blind man at Bethsaida, we read in Mark chapter 8 of Jesus telling his disciples:

“That the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

So on the one hand we have a God who says we are on the eve of something better, and on the other we have a God in the person of Jesus who says the future is like this but only much worse. Who are we to believe? Perhaps the answer lies in Jesus’s words a little later:

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Jesus does not say “if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and believe in me (Mark 8: 34-35).”

The weight of our cross may threaten to erase our very being, and our faith may wax and wane, but our aim is to keep following Jesus. Our aim is to keep following Jesus. As one commentator tells us “this prediction is the first element in an extended section of

the gospel (8:31-10:45) where Jesus predicts his passion and elaborates on the implications of that suffering not only of for himself but also for any would-be follower”.<sup>1</sup>

The foretelling of his own death and resurrection before Jesus then urging people to follow him makes our path as Christian pilgrims incredibly lucid. There will be suffering but there will also be hope and the promise of something better. The weight of this truth of the journey ahead shakes Peter to his core. Jesus’s response is strange, not addressing Peter but going to the root of his rebuke, to the denial of God (Tuckett 2001: 903) and what that means for humanity. The humanity in Peter is confronted with the realisation that this, what Jesus has just revealed, is something bigger than his person; it is something that Peter will neither be able to stop nor control.

In Peter we see the manifestation of the trademark of Lent: a call to resistance. To resist the fall into a reliance on human things, on the human gaze, and instead turn our hearts and bodies towards, and go back to, God, within the wilderness wandering of Lent, and tell God what it has been like, what it is like, what it really is like, being me, being you, living in our bodies, loving in our bodies and waiting in our souls. As we were reminded on Ash Wednesday, it is about “turning back towards Christ and finding out who we always were, made in the image of God and beloved in Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

As Psalm 22, appointed for today, tells us:

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<sup>1</sup> C. M. Tuckett, ‘Mark’ in Barton, John and Muddiman John, *The Oxford Biblical Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.886-922, p.903.  
<sup>2</sup> Rev’d Lucy Winkett, Sermon on Ash Wednesday, 17 February 2021.

For God did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he [God] did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to God”.

The call of Abraham and Sarah reminds us that God does not really care how old we are, or how old we feel, or what state we feel our body or mind may be in, because God speaks to our place in the boundlessness of eternity, to our naming and being held beyond this earthly plain. Abraham is established in the promise of El Shaddai (Genesis 17:1) often translated as ‘God Almighty’. Sarah’s longings are planted in and supplanted by God’s Word. We, like Sarah and Abraham, are on the threshold, on the eve of something better. As American artist and ordained minister Jan L Richardson writes, in exploring the idea of thresholds as places of illumination:

“May your longings lead you far and farther still toward the place where what you desire can be met only by God. May your hungering bring you home by another way.”<sup>3</sup>

We now have a Government Road Map out of our national lockdown and a vaccine roll out that means that we can start to see what the second half of 2021 could look like. We are on the eve of something better. This does not mean that our hospital beds are suddenly empty or that people are not dying, isolated, suffering or in pain. It does not mean the wilderness is or has been a mirage. The wilderness is real, but the promise is greater.

Next month, it will have been a year since Covid-19 transformed our lives. Since then the UK has lost over 122,000 people to the virus. That is at the very least 122,000 plus families still walking the journey of bereavement and still carrying their shroud of mourning. The message that we are on the eve of something better cannot and does not speak into this grief to dismiss it, but rather it speaks to this grief to uphold it, and to say to us all that it is one step in front of the other, in faith and hope. We take one step in front of the other knowing that our ground is love, and that the light of the Easter dawn makes each step more bearable, more steady, more purposeful.

*Amen.*

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<sup>3</sup> Jan L. Richardson, *Illuminating the Threshold* (2015) p.15: <https://sanctuaryofwomen.com/blog/womens-christmas-2015-illuminating-the-threshold/> .