

Sunday, 13 March 2022  
The Second Sunday of Lent  
The Rev'd Dr Mariama Ifode-Blease  
**'What have you done for me lately?'**

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

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?  
the LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?  
When the wicked, even mine enemies and my foes, came upon me to eat up my flesh,  
they stumbled and fell.  
Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear:  
though war should rise against me, in this will I be confident.  
One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after;  
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,  
to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to enquire in God's temple (Psalm 27:1-4)

The unsettling and firm confidence of the psalmist makes for challenging reading in the wake of the invasion of the Ukraine. We cannot say that we would feel this level of certainty or have this kind of faith if we had been hiding a cellar or in a train station underground for days. Or, if pregnant and/or looking after an elderly relative, we had been forced to leave our family to cross into a new land on our own, while the male members stayed to fight, or if we had been drenched in the trauma of having to pick up the body of our child from the rubble of a bombed school or hospital. Every day I have prayed and every day I see that the horror does not stop. Don't ask me to do anything more for you God, because I have to ask you God, *what have you done for me lately?*

And this is the question that Abram is really asking God when he says "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." (Genesis 15: 3). We hear Abram's words in Genesis 15:3 and can feel his frustration. He has already been called by God, promised great things, journeyed towards the Negev desert, fled to Egypt, and been separated from family members in the preceding chapters. Abram and God have some serious history. God is not up there and Abram down here. God is ever present, right there, always available, always listening, always ready to respond. So it feels very natural for God to say to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great". But Abram is having none of that. He wants more, something he can see, his hope realised. He asks for an heir. Abram feels as if he has no other choice but to ask God indirectly: what have you done for me lately?

When the students of St Francis Academy in the film *Sister Act II* are threatened with the closure of their school by officious diocesan administrator, Mr Crisp, they have to dig deep into their potential, helped by nun-on-the-run Sister Mary Clarence. It is in the finale, when the students are in with a chance of winning the All-State Choir Championship, that they ask the audience what have you done for God lately?

Against the backdrop of military aggression, people fleeing their homes, some with only the clothes on their back, refugees are asked to go and find a visa application centre, which is

opened between specified hours only, to seek a visa to be able to leave a war zone. They are asked to comply with rigid process and procedure in between being lost, bombed and found. While consular and diplomatic staff can be forgiven for having to respond and then pivot to an evolving international catastrophe, there can be no excuse for the culture of victimisation that blames the refugee or asylum seeker for what has happened and is happening to them. What have you done for us lately, refugee, asks the system created to keep them out? What makes you think you are worthy to enter our island? This is not the question that needs to be asked. And even if by some stretch of imagination it were, the Home Secretary would certainly not be the person who would be asking it. While I am not a politician, my firm view is that we need an immigration policy that speaks of human dignity and is humane in its development and implementation. What have *you* done for us lately, Home Secretary?

As we have come to expect, Jesus does not need to ask many questions. He is simply telling it like it is, and that is painful for those who hear him and those who are not listening. In the face of daily tragedy and unflinching intentionality to harm and destroy, we can see Jesus's lament over Jerusalem in a new light. Here in Luke's Gospel, chapter 13, Jesus embodies the confidence of the writer of the psalm and basically says, *I know who I am, I know what I am here to do, and I know that God is with me*. He also sticks two fingers up at Herod and then turns to the reality at hand. Jerusalem is not as it should be. It is a city "that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" (Luke 13:34). Instead of welcome, the prophet is met with hostility, instead of being heard, the prophet is persecuted, and instead of being allowed to live, death awaits them. We are under no illusion that God's vision for the city, in which sits the temple and all that this represents in terms of worship and ritual, is broader, and encompasses more than the hurt and devastation invoked by both its leaders, the occupying force and the citizens caught in between struggles for power. The vision of God is seeking our imagination to meet it and respond.

We hear in (Genesis 15:8) "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." But he [Abram] said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" It may be that for some of us that we often ask God for proof, proof of existence, a sign that God is there, evidence that God is here. Yet we have to recognise that sometimes we can see this proof, and sometimes we cannot. We cannot necessarily see God in war, nor should we necessarily try. War is a human invention, and God's intervention in it is not obligatory when we have already been given the tools, skills, gifts, resources and imagination to make peace.

Yet God still responds to our darkness and fear: "As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him" (Genesis 15:12). It is in this and after this that God makes a covenant with Abram. From the question: what have you done for me lately?, which Abram indirectly asks comes more grace, more love, more generosity. God does not say life will be easy and all will be well, but God does say, *I am bound to you and you to me for all eternity*. We are bound to God because of God unyielding love that sees the darkness that threatens to suffocate us. God makes a claim to us, and asks us to remember who we are in God's identity, as Jesus did when questioned by the Pharisees and when they made clear that his life was under threat. We need to know

and remember who we are. We need to know what we are here on earth to do, and we need to know that God is with us.

As Christians, if we are asking questions of God, which is right and good as we deepen and strengthen our faith, we need to be prepared to hear the answer. And in this season of Lent as we wrestle with our wilderness walking, we must believe that God is not distant. God is closer than we think. When we turn to God and ask our God: what have you done for me lately?, as we try to make sense of the chaos of our world and the trials of our own smaller but equally significant world, we must be prepared for us God to turn to us and asks us not what have you done for me lately, but simply: *what have you done, what have you not done? And what is there still to do?*

And it is here, in this space, that our honesty and vulnerability are met by God, a God who is still waiting for us to see how divine love and grace can transform our lives, if we let it.

**Amen.**