

(Genesis 15:1-6; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40)

As some of you know, I have been away this week. I enjoyed a four-day cycling trip up the Dale, across to Carlisle, through the Scottish Borders and along part of the Tweed Valley, then home via Coldstream, Hexham and Durham. I saw the local devastation caused by the recent flooding; I encountered a former curate of this parish, Jan Kearton, deeply fulfilled in her role as Canon Warden of Carlisle Cathedral; I discovered the so-called *Junction Pool* at Kelso, where the Tweed and Teviot Rivers meet (and known as the ‘Holy Grail’ for fishers of salmon!); and I found Durham Cathedral as breathtaking as ever.

Then, on the last day, it was quite something to revisit a memorable bike ride from almost exactly two years ago: a ride on which Scott and I found ourselves by chance on the same stretch of the Reeth Road...

On that ride in 2017 I had set off from Newcastle and was heading for Leyburn: I had thought I knew where I was going. But then, to borrow a phrase from our second reading today, I ended up being ‘called to set out for a[nother] place’: *this* place!

Now I realise, that for some of us, I am being needlessly obscure; others may know exactly what I am talking about! Either way, the point is that as with Abraham, there are times in our lives when God clearly invites us to take a step into the unknown; a leap of faith. Our first two readings today illustrate the unparalleled scale and depth of Abraham’s faith, a quality of faith held up as an example for us all to try to follow.

Talking of leaps of faith, and alongside Abraham as an example, I feel I must also mention salmon! If Abraham’s journey into the unknown was impressive then so is that of the average salmon. I had not realised that salmon rarely feed after they leave the sea on their extraordinary fresh water journey upstream to their breeding grounds. In fact, they can live for up to a year without feeding! No wonder they like to take a

rest from their journey in the calm waters – the ‘comfort zone’ – of the Junction Pool at Kelso.

It seems that Abraham and salmon have another thing in common: the promise of vast numbers of descendents! God said to Abraham that in choosing to obey his call to set out for the Promised Land Abraham would have descendents as numerous as the stars in the sky. In Peebles, upstream from Kelso on the River Tweed, the town’s coat of arms bears a Latin inscription *Contra Nando Incrementum* which means ‘increase by swimming against the stream’. And significantly, of the three fish illustrated on the coat of arms only one is facing forwards; the other two face backwards. This represents the fact that for every salmon that leaves the sea two return.

Whether we prefer to think of the example of Abraham or of salmon, faith is defined by the author of the letter to the Hebrews as ‘the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen’. But we need to remember that true faith is not the same as blind faith. True faith comes only from a living and growing relationship with God – which like any other relationship requires constant work if it is to continue to live and to grow.

Look again at our first reading, at the dialogue between God and Abram, as he was then known. See how Abram questioned God – and reflect that what we might call ‘discernment’ is actually the same thing. In seeking to know the direction God wants of us, most of the time we are not given a ‘Reeth Road’ experience, a kind of ‘nudge’. Most of the time, we have to ask questions by trying one door and then another, and another, before finding any hint of an opening. It’s hard work. And yet God wills us to keep trying, because as Jesus said, ‘it is the Father’s good pleasure to give you his kingdom’.

As we grow in our understanding and experience of God, in our delight to be in his presence – and in our awareness of his delight to be in ours – then we soon learn which doors to try. Discernment of God’s call, an appreciation of what he wants us to

do and who he wants us to be becomes less difficult – even if the nature of what he asks of us may become more so.

In all this, perhaps we can learn again from salmon: if there is ‘growth by swimming against the stream’ then can that not apply as much to us as individuals and as a church community as it does to that particular species? The key point is that we need to be able to discern exactly when and how to leave the particular ‘Junction Pool’ we have reached on our own journey of faith, and embark on the next stage of growth.

(I need hardly add here, pushing the salmon metaphor even further, there are surely hazards lying in wait for us if we stay too long in the comfort zone of the ‘Junction Pool’. Even though they have no need to feed on their journey upstream salmon are for some unfathomable reason easily tempted by the fisherman’s fly – which of course masks a barbed hook. If we become too comfortable to journey further upstream might we not more easily succumb to temptation, too?)

Today, we as individuals and as a church community have choices ahead of us. As we seek to grow in faith and in mission it is hard to know which way to turn. But as bread for the journey I close with this thought from the writer Helen Orchard: ‘We always get a choice with God, and if we seek it, help in choosing so that we may respond with humility and courage’.

Thanks be to God. Amen.