

Sunday Morning Worship
Readings, Reflection and Prayers 28th April



Genesis 22:1-18

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.' So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt-offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.' Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'Father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' He said, 'The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?' Abraham said, 'God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.' So the two of them walked on together.

When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.' And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and

took the ram and offered it up as a burnt-offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place 'The Lord will provide'; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.'

The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, 'By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.'

This is the word of the Lord.

Acts 8:26-40

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over to this chariot and join it.' So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.

In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.'

The eunuch asked Philip, 'About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?' Then Philip began to speak, and

starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?' He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

This is the word of the Lord.

John 15:1-8

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Reflection by Rob Holdsworth

What to make of last words, what people say very shortly before they die? Winston Churchill, after another stroke, cried out: 'I'm bored with it all'; Jane Austen said: 'Pray for me; oh pray for me'. Both seem to have been aware of what they were facing. Others seem rather to miss the mark: 'I feel great' (Peter Maravich); and then we have the over-optimistic General John Sedgwick, in full military regalia, waving dismissively at the Confederate lines, and saying: 'They couldn't hit an elephant at that range', only to find that they could and duly did; and what about Humphrey Bogart's last words: 'I should never have switched from Scotch to martini'? All interesting, amusing even, but perhaps not life-giving for us.

But what about Jesus' last words? To our Gospel passage for today. The scene is set and the die is cast; Judas has just left the Upper Room, and Jesus knows that He has only a few minutes left to speak to those He loves before He too must leave, for the garden of Gethsemane and his arrest and death. His last words matter, and today's Gospel reading is a significant part of what He chose to say. How to stand firm in a hostile world? It's what the disciples would need to do, and Jesus knew it; and He knew that He had to help them. Standing firm in a hostile world is what we need to do too, and Jesus knows it; and these words of His in the Upper Room that have been read today are an equal timely reminder for us; they're words of great encouragement and hope, and (or is it 'but?'), I/we need to heed them.

The last words of Jesus matter: I am the true vine. I'll come to our OT passage from Genesis in a moment, but first elsewhere in the OT if I may, because although the disciples would have understood why Jesus was talking about a vine, it's perhaps worth reminding ourselves that in Isaiah (ch 5) God had used this as an analogy, describing Israel as His vine, planted and cared for by Him, for the good of the world, but despite everything that He'd done, that vine, His people, was still unable to produce good fruit for the world; we find the same image in Ps 80, in Jeremiah (ch 22), and in Ezekiel (e.g. chs 15 and 19). There was fruit, but it was bad fruit. As Isaiah says: 'God looked for justice from His people, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress'. Nothing changed, and the consequences of Israel's lack of good-fruitfulness remained dire as the OT shows. What's to be done? Answer: God in Jesus needs to be the vine, to embody the people of Israel, to be the

source of good fruitfulness for the world that Israel couldn't manage to be; it's the only workable solution. That's what Jesus is saying and meaning when He said: 'I am the true vine'. He is the substitute. And so to our OT reading from Genesis ch 22 and another way that Jesus became what was needed, became the substitute, was God's provision to the world, and that great statement of faith by Abraham: 'God Himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering'. Fast forward to that road down to Gaza, and what was the Ethiopian reading? Answer: another passage in Isaiah about a lamb. Question from the Ethiopian: 'Who is Isaiah referring to?' Answer from Philip: Jesus, so: the substitute, the sacrificial lamb for all humanity. Thank God that in Jesus He's provided the substitute because we couldn't manage on our own. I am the true vine.

Jesus' last words matter: My Father is the vine grower. I'm conscious as I stand here that I'm in the presence of some serious gardeners, but even if you're just an amateur like me, we've all been to gardens that are a riot of fruitfulness, colour and variety, and it's because the gardeners know what they're doing, and one thing that a good caring gardener knows is that vines, fruit bushes: they need pruning if they're to survive and bear good fruit. I'm very much an amateur, but even I know that with my currant bushes, the dead wood needs to be cut out to avoid rot killing the whole, and equally living growth needs to be pruned back if the bush is to be properly fruitful in *this* season of its life. So it is with our lives, and God knows best, and it's always for our good when we feel Him cutting out the deadwood, say of pride, anger or self-dependence, and, painful though it can be, it's also for our good when He cuts back parts of our lives that have been positively fruitful in the past, but aren't now right for God's good plans for the current season in our lives. God's pruning, even if painful, is always for a loving good purpose. It's true in churches when priorities need to change, something that Lindsey has spoken about, and it's equally true in our individual lives too. Some of you may know that my legal career came to an end rather suddenly a few weeks ago because of some very unexpected changes in the rules about judges sitting after reaching pension age. I'm seeing this as God's pruning in my life, so Julia can have her husband back after my many years of hard work, but equally I've wondered: is this perhaps also pruning for new fruitfulness in a new direction? We'll see, but either way, I trust my Father God, because I know that He's all

love, all caring, and He knows what's best for me. My Father is the vine grower.

Jesus' last words matter: Abide in Me. What to make of this? Jesus is speaking to His disciples. He's just said in v3 that they had become clean because of the word that He had spoken to them, and now He goes on to stress the importance of abiding, remaining in Him, if they are to be fruitful. It's the same for us, if we, non-Jews, are to be fruitful, as branches grafted in to the main, as Paul puts in Romans. Any good gardener knows that it's the main vine that provides nourishment for the branches, that a good strong connection is vital in a storm (and the storms of life come to us all), and that branches that aren't connected just wither and die. So I understand Jesus as saying in today's Gospel that we too need to continue to rest in Christ, with confidence, maintaining that lifeline to Him through prayer, through worship, through communion, through obedience, and through listening, faith, and trust, spending time with Him, receiving from Him, here in church for sure on a Sunday, but every day, because that's how this lifeline works, being willing open channels for Him to keep us alive. So we need to stick with Him, individually and as a church, and as we do so, it's inevitable that we will be fruitful. As we heard in our OT reading, it was faith in God's good purposes that drove Abraham's decisions and thinking that day on Mount Moriah, and fruitfulness followed, including for us non-Jews, as the letter to the Hebrews highlights. What of 'fruitfulness'? What's that about? Isn't it about reflecting the character of Christ in how we live our lives, allowing Him to work through us, loving who He loves, loving what He loves, and showing the fruits of the Spirit that Paul highlights: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – all incredibly practical for every-day living, and as we do so in 21st Century Worcester, others will be blessed. So: abide in Me, and let's not forget that the alternative that Jesus describes isn't good; you've just heard His words of warning for those who don't abide in Him, and no one here will want to countenance this church withering, or our own individual faith withering. Abide in Me.

Jesus' last words matter; His *words* matter. Jesus speaks in today's Gospel passage about the importance of His words, so: what He said, abiding, living in us. It's clear from what He says to the disciples in today's Gospel passage that it was through accepting His *word* that they became Christians (v3) and

that it's through continuing to abide, to live in Him and in line with His *words* (v7) that they remain in Him and can then pray appropriately. Once again today, the book containing the Gospels was held aloft in this church; it's important that we have a high view of the authority of Scripture generally, but especially in terms of the words of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels, because He is the truth, unchanging, inerrant. Having a good understanding of scripture matters – it's important for any follower, but it's important also for others who we meet, and it mattered hugely when that Ethiopian enquirer met Philip on the road to Gaza. Lindsey gives me plenty of thinking time before I give a reflection, but there are times in all our lives when unexpected questions come, opportunities come, to explain our faith, and it's right to be ready. Peter highlights this in his first letter when he writes: 'Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...' (1 Peter 3:15). It's a good principle and our NT reading gives us a case study on this. Philip was no Revd.; he wasn't one of the 12; he'd had no formal training; all that had happened was that he'd recently been asked by the fledgling early church to be a waiter, to make sure that some of the widows had food; but he must have listened carefully to the apostles' teaching, and now it's his turn to make a difference, one-to-one with this Ethiopian, and he's gentle and respectful, asking a question ('Do you understand what you are reading?') and then answering the Ethiopian's question. All Philip did was to tell the Ethiopian the good news about Jesus, I'm sure in simple terms, but clearly and persuasively, no doubt because the Holy Spirit was active in Philip. If only there were more such conversations on the road to Gaza in 2024. Although maybe the theory, the prospect of us explaining the good news about Jesus, might seem daunting, it's not rocket science for a Christian to do so, and we have the Holy Spirit to help us, but being familiar with scripture, with what Jesus said is vital, and it's what Jesus wants for us, as our Gospel passage shows. I recently spoke to someone at St Stephen's who's chosen to read through the whole Bible this year in chronological order, and they said how glad they are that they're doing so, and there's someone else, who is here today, who I know is gladly doing the same thing. If you join for morning and evening prayers, and it's easy to do so, and I enjoy doing so, there are always OT and NT readings to hear. I'm also really glad that I'm in a house group; it's so helpful to have a chance to think about the Bible, what God says, what

Jesus said, and to do so with the shared experiences of others. Isn't this doing what Jesus asks of His followers in today's Gospel passage, having His words remain in us? So: a question for you and me: what might we/you/I think of doing in response to these words of Jesus? That bible of yours at home – what about reading a gospel this week? What about joining a house group? Lindsey's note in the pew-sheet invites you to speak to her about this; some already have, but if you haven't yet contacted her, what about starting that conversation today before you leave church or send her an email this afternoon? Maybe try morning or evening prayers next week, just once – and see if you like it? Jesus' last words matter; His *words* matter.

One final point: we don't know the last words of that Ethiopian, but his last words as recorded in the Bible are simple, for all time: 'Look; here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptised?' Baptism; it's what the Ethiopian asked for; it's the right response to belief in Christ for everyone in this church today, whatever your age, whatever your background, and the font is right by the door. I wonder: is there someone here today who hasn't yet been baptised. If that's you, just as it was for the Ethiopian on that road to Gaza, today is your day, your chance to say to Lindsey before you leave church today: 'Look; here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptised?'

Prayers

Let us pray to the Lord God Almighty,
in whom we live and move and have our being.

To the bidding: Your kingdom come,
Please respond: Your will be done.

Your kingdom come,
Your will be done.

Father, we want to produce good fruit in abundance;
nurture us as branches of the true vine,
train and prune us where necessary,
and may our spiritual harvest make rich wine,
wine of your Kingdom.

Silence

Your kingdom come,
Your will be done.

Father, clearly we see around our world
the tragic and expensive consequences
of branches cut off from the true vine.
We pray for a seeking after your truth
and a desire to act rightly and justly
in all areas of human society.

Silence

Your kingdom come,
Your will be done.

Father, we pray for those to whom we are linked
by family, friendships or work;

especially we pray for those
separated from their loved ones or their home.

Silence

Your kingdom come,

Your will be done.

Father, we long for healing and wholeness
in all who suffer;

guide us to understand
how we might be part of the healing.

From our own community we pray especially for:

Claire, Joyce Pringle, Peter Murphy, Anuwat Wanggane, Joan Tyson,
Alan Coe, Jack Tubby, Rob & Lucy, Roger Jones, Patricia Ash, Jason Thomson,
Ryan Day, Bryan Plester, Brenda Hulland, David New, and Adrina and Alan
Price.

Silence

Your kingdom come,

Your will be done.

Father, we know that death
cannot separate us from your love;

In that knowledge we commend to your keeping
those who have recently died.

And we pray for all who mourn.

We remember with love and gratitude those
whose anniversary of death falls at this time: Felix Alexander, Daphne Link,
Felix Alexander, Joan Kendall, Jim Thorp and Harriet Symmonds.

And we remember those we love but see no longer.

We commend them all into your unfailing and eternal care.

Silence

Your kingdom come,

Your will be done.

Father, we thank you that we can live
in the joyful freedom of your love,
as we dedicate ourselves to serving others.

Merciful Father,
accept these prayers
for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen.