

19th Sunday Year C (2013)

Forty Martyrs'; St Bede's

Look around. We are an ageing Church. There are exceptions but most of us are oldies and wrinkles; we have half a century, or considerably more, on the clock and our future is filled with the promise of back pains and bedpans, and empty of combs and tooth-brushes. Our aches and pains are only going to grow ever more aching and paining.

And are we depressed? Are we downcast and dispirited as we slide down the descent that has only one destination? Possibly. But only if today's second reading entirely passed you by because you forgot your hearing aid again, or just got distracted with idle thoughts of incipient dementia.

Abraham is lauded in the second reading. He is 'our father in faith'. Abraham is the spiritual progenitor of three great world faiths - Judaism, Christianity and (through his first-born son, Ishmael, by Hagar the slave-girl of Sarah) Islam. And Abraham was **seventy-five** years old when God called him out of Ur of the Chaldeans. He was **one hundred** years old when Sarah gave birth to Isaac, and somewhat older when God put him to the unhappy test of 'sacrificing' his beloved son. As the author of the letter to the Hebrews indelicately puts it, he was 'as good as dead'.

Even making allowances for possible inaccuracy in the numeracy, (while remembering that life-expectancy was half the modern figures in the West) Abraham was an old man, long ready for the Old People's Home and plenty of bed-rest, when God said, "Oh, by the way Abe, I've got a little job for you".

His wife, Sarah was, the Hebrews' author is more delicate here, 'past the age' for conceiving. She was a little old lady who kept her teeth in a glass. When the three mysterious visitors (we heard part of this story a few weeks ago) when the three strangers are banqueted by Abraham and in return announce that in a year's time Sarah will have a son, she is in the tent eves-dropping - she must have had good hearing for an old girl - and she laughs. It has to be a joke. So when the child is born he is named 'laughing-boy', Isaac.

Mind you it must be no laughing matter to have a child in your dotage. But it was a joke God kept repeating, down to Zechariah, Elizabeth and John the Baptizer.

God has a wicked sense of humour. He lets Abraham and Sarah live their long lives in quiet obscurity and when their mortal coils are winding down to their natural conclusion he makes himself known with an outlandish command that would defeat the imagination, as well as the courage, of most young men in their prime.

Perhaps that is the point. The young have so much to do. Their lives are ahead of them. As well as the practical necessities of work and family they have their dreams to dream. When can you hear the voice of God in a busy, care-filled, ambitious life?

In the calm of advanced years when the dreams have dissipated, the hopes narrowed, the expectations diminished, when we have finally accepted that we will never score the winning goal in the cup final nor make a century at Lords, in that jagged tranquillity awaiting the final peace, the voice of God can be more readily discerned. Listen closely. He might just be saying, as he said to Abraham, "Forget the peace,

chum. I have work for you.”

Abraham is not renowned just for being old. He is revered as a man of faith. He trusted the Word he discerned. Despite his many years he believed that he had a future and through him there was a future for generations without number - unless you can count the number of stars in the heavens or the grains of sand on the sea-shore.

The old have a reputation, deserved or not, for complaint and pessimism. The present is never as good as what went before, in the never-never land of long ago. “And while we're at it, we've had enough change, thank-you very much. Just leave things as they are and leave us in peace.” This is the parody of the elderly - and like good parodies it carries significant truth.

If such had been the attitude or mentality of Abraham he would never have left Ur of the Chaldeans. If Abraham at seventy-five had not been open to breaking with the old and familiar to go who knows where in a new way of living, there would have been no Promised Land, no covenant, no descendants; and therefore, no Jesus, no new covenant in his blood, no new Promised Land in heaven.

The most quoted quotation of John Henry Cardinal Newman runs: “*In a world above it may be different, but here below to live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often*”. As Abraham so well illustrates, we must be open to change as long as we live, and then we will live. Not to be able to change is to be already dead.

In today's rather long Gospel Jesus says two very important things that link with out theme. He says, “Do not be afraid”, and “Be ready”.

“Do not be afraid”. The opposite of faith is fear. The person of faith acts in trust and conquers fear. The fearful stick with what they know, treasure the familiar, and never move. Abraham, man of faith, trusted, overcame his fear and moved at God's command.

“Be ready”. The early Church expected Jesus' immanent return and when he did not come in glory within a generation they had to be encouraged not to lose heart and stray from the faith. We must be ready for anything - the coming of the Lord, a terrorist attack, or the call from God, even in old age, to something new.

The renewal of the Church is not the prerogative of the young. Blessed John XXIII, the Pope of the Second Vatican Council was a youngster in the Conclave of 1958 which elected him Pope. He was 77, nearly 78, and had mighty work to do. Our present Pope, Francis, who has already done much to revitalize the Church is a sprightly 76.

We are an ageing Church. We must be for we belong to an ageing nation. But only the foolish see age as a synonym for decrepitude or irrelevance. Rather, with Abraham and Sarah as our models, we should be seeing what wisdom and experience are available among us to renew the Church and ensure that there is a Church, a vibrant Church, in this place for future generations to carry forward.