

Sermon for 25.2.24 (St. Martin's Lent 2B)

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-22

Mark 8 31-38

Terms and conditions – they're those unintelligible messages you hear at the end of adverts on Classic FM, spoken at 100 miles an hour. They're that tiny box lurking down the bottom of a page in equally tiny print, ready to catch us out when we think we've ticked or filled in everything. We only discover them after 20 minutes of trying to work out why we're still not being allowed to complete that insurance renewal or that holiday reservation, and we agree to them even when we haven't a clue what they're about, just so we can finally complete our objective. We'll ignore the fact that they're actually legally binding us to something, because it all seems irrelevant box-ticking.

Well today those pesky terms and conditions are lying in wait for Abram. Many years ago, aged a mere 75, he'd happily ticked the box for God's conditions for his life – he'd agreed to travel to a land goodness knows where, which his so far, non-existent offspring, would inherit. Had he really understood what he was signing himself up to? And when the promised son had failed to appear despite waiting so long, in despair Abram and Sarai had failed to trust God's timing and had substituted their own solution. Trying to be faithful to God's t's and c's certainly hadn't proved easy.

Today though we meet Abram being forgiven, being promised that Ishmael will be blessed, being offered a renewal of the original covenant between God and himself, ratified by a change of name for himself and Sarai. At 99 years young, he hears again that he's to be exceedingly fruitful, and that he and Sarah will have a son next year. No wonder Abraham falls down laughing.

Perhaps sometimes it's just as well if we don't read the small print fully before we sign up. If we did, we might never take the risk. The disciples had risked it before really understanding and had begun a new and exciting journey. They'd absorbed new teaching, they'd witnessed amazing miracles, they'd eaten with society's lowest, but they'd also enjoyed a certain status as chosen followers of the coolest superhero in Israel. But now the terms and conditions are being laid out in uncompromising terms, that following Jesus means obeying God's truths rather than their own desires, whatever the consequences, and that following him means all the time, not just when it's comfortable to do so.

I think back to my confirmation when I first opted for the Christian journey. In effect, I'd risked declaring myself not to be a robot, and identified the correct number of traffic lights to prove it, but had I fully investigated all the terms and conditions before I committed myself? Had I understood back then that being a Christian is about more than attending church on a Sunday?

Because it turns out as we journey on, that being a Christian is about loving our neighbour even when they're rude to us or hurt us. It turns out that being a Christian is about sacrificing our time to learning, praying, reading God's word, even when there are other things we'd rather be doing. It turns out that signing up means actively sharing what we believe with other people even when we're likely to be laughed at or viewed condescendingly with a sort of pity. It turns out that sometimes it's standing up for God's truths, even when society or those around us are telling us that those truths are old fashioned and inappropriate for today's

culture. It turns out that those who have stood firm in God's truths have found themselves dismissed from their jobs and alienated or even faced death.

Stewart Henderson wrote this. It's called 'Splintered Messiah'.

I don't want a splintered Messiah
In a sweat stained greasy grey robe
I want a new one.
I couldn't take this one to parties,
People would say 'Who's your friend?'
I'd give an embarrassed giggle and change the subject.
I don't want his cross in the hall,
It doesn't go with the wallpaper.
I don't want him standing there
Like a sad ballet dancer with holes in his tights
I want a different Messiah.
I don't want the true Christ,
I want a false one.

I think to myself how true that is for us human beings, how we prefer to choose the easy options, to follow when it suits us rather than fulfilling the terms and conditions when they challenge our own choices. But then, Jesus's words: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me," might well be totally disabling **if** he'd stopped there.

But he didn't. He didn't.

He added a promise, a guarantee of what we stand to gain if we sacrifice our own selfish whims and fancies to follow him: "Those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." If we try our best we're promised salvation, eternal life with him. This is his binding contract; this is what we gain when we agree to his terms and conditions. Of course we'll fail, probably pretty often, just as Abraham did, just as the disciples did, but God will be there when the crosses get too heavy because he understands just how it is. Generation after generation, from Abraham up to now, have tried their best and the gospel lives on. Now then it's our turn to keep the faith. AMEN