

When I was infant's school, many moons ago, I remember that I had two favourite games to play as a whole class – one was called 'cat and mouse' and the other was called 'The Farmer in the Dell'. In this game the whole class sat in the circle and one person got to be the farmer and to skip around the circle while everyone sang the farmer in the dell. Now as the farmer skips around the circle, they get to choose a wife, then the wife chooses a cow, and the cow a sheep, and sheep, a dog etc until everyone belonged on the farm.

I don't know if I liked this game because it was about setting up a farm, like we all lived on, or the singing, or that we all got to join in – but there was a rhythm to this game. One thing followed another, and all seemed ordered and sane! To a five year old that felt very reassuring – life had a pattern and an order. But of course as we got older we stopped playing the game, and also we learnt that life's order is not as straight forward as choosing animals to have on your farm, or even choosing a life partner. Things don't always follow the pattern we expect, or want – and most of the time that is for a good reason.

Our selection of readings today for the most part address this issue of expectations and patterns. From Genesis after several weeks hearing about the exploits of Abraham, today we jump from Isaac's sacrifice to his grief after the death of his mother, and his servant finding him a wife – Rebekah. Even after reading through this story several times early in the week, I still found it confusing and confronting. The layers of traditions and expectations which are recorded seem at odds, I suspect, with most of our experiences of the world. But this story took place well over 3000 years ago – so it is not our world, or even our expectations.

This is a long narrative from Genesis, filled with many details – with much drama and humour! For example, Rebekah offers to draw water for the camels, but one camel can drink 20-30 gallons of water at a time, and there are 10 camels! She is not only beautiful, it seems, but exceedingly (freakishly?) strong¹.

Most of the story we hear is about the unnamed servant who is worried that he will not find a suitable young woman for Isaac, one who will be willing to leave family and homeland to travel to a place she's never seen before. So he does what he can; going to the city of his master's kinsfolk, he stops by the village well and there he prays. And it is during his pray that Rebekah comes to the well to draw water.

There are many unusual things in this text, and some which we can learn from. The unnamed servant - Prepares. Prays. Waits – He watches for signs of God's faithfulness. Also there are new patterns at work here – when Isaac see's Rebekah the text says ' he loves her'. In the patriarchal culture of ancient Israel, love was not considered a necessary ingredient in a marriage, but it seems that God want's Isaac

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3281

to find love. While God is not really mentioned in this whole narrative, the essence of God's message is clear – patterns are not always in the places we expect or outcomes as we think they might be!

Which brings us to the readings we hear from the letter to the Romans and from Matthew. I love the first verse we heard from Romans' today - *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate*². How many times have any of us uttered these same words? Why can't I live out the commitments and actions I desire to easily? Paul in this passage seems to lament his ability, and the ability of all believers to hold on to what is true. He ponders this throughout the whole passage.

It is the very issue which Jesus is also addressing as he speaks in Matthew 11 – you say you want one thing and when it is given to you, you want another!

The first section of verses we heard speak of almost Jesus frustration that people criticise John because he fasts, and then Jesus because he doesn't – what sign of God do you want!! You hear his wonder at what humans need to believe – but this passage is not just a reprimand – it is also a promise! It is why we have two separate sections in this passage spelt out in today's gospel.

In contrast to Jesus frustration at the start, we jump 6 verses ahead and hear Jesus offer comfort – he says 'look I know this is all too much for you – so just let go and I will carry you!'

I was helped to think about this image during the week, when my friend who has just become a Deacon took possession of a mobility scooter to help her get around the hilly roads in the parish she has moved too. My friend has many gifts but she has never driven a car, and a suspect not even ridden a bike, so steering a mobility scooter was a new thing. Thankfully they don't go more than 6 miles an hour. But as she had her lesson to control how it worked, her instructor told her that if all else fails, let go of the handles, as this turns off the motor, and the scooter will stop. 'Let Go and it will stop'.

What a great strap line for 'To Stop – let go!'

How many expectations or situations or even circumstances do we face in life which escalate or cause us sleepless nights becomes we keep the motor running. How much which it transform our understanding of ourselves and even the situation if we just let go!

Now letting go is different to giving up. Letting go, means we relinquish the power, or even perceived sense of power that we have – to see where the journey might take us. I was never able to learn to roller skate or ice-skate because I never trusted myself (or others) enough to let go of the wall!

² Romans 7:15

Letting Go takes a great deal of courage most of the time. But so often we have to let go of our expectations for things to change.

When the Warden's and the PCC met with the Archdeacon on Monday night one of the things we were talking about was our shared frustration that despite what feels like our best efforts, St Anne's doesn't seem to grow. The Archdeacon reminded us of two things. 1, with the number of people that leave St Anne's when they move out of area each year, the fact that we maintain a constant size does mean at one level we are growing, or new people are coming, just that people are moving out too.

The second, and actually more poignant thing however was he challenged us to consider that the nature of Church, and how people encounter church is changing! We have over 300 people a week come through our doors – but not on a Sunday. Our growth, and even our growth as a congregation – may not happen on a Sunday morning – He suggested that we may need to let go of that expectations of what and when we think 'church' is if we really want to grow as a community.

Sometimes we have to let go of our expectations, of how we think the world should be - if we are to move forward. Jesus, having just told the disciple's what discipleship would mean, almost immediately has to challenge their expectations of this very discipleship – step outside of how you think it will be or should be. Look at how it is now!

While this advice appears in both Luke and Matthew's Gospel's it is only in Matthew that we receive the additional words of comfort. "*Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you ... and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*"³

The rest Jesus speaks of here, is not rest at the end of the day – or even at specified period during the year or even at the end of our working life. Rest in this context is more about a state of being – rather it is the promise we are reminded of in Jesus – Emmanuel – God is with us – this is the rest – the letting go and letting God so to speak!

In these narratives Jesus doesn't simply call our pictures and expectations into question, but also gives us another picture. God is the one who bears our burdens. God is the one who shows up in our need⁴. God is the one who comes along side of us. Like a bridge over troubled water so to speak – God is always by our side.

Whether we are challenged that the patterns of life that don't seem to be taking the path we had thought or hoped; or if like Isaac we are grieving and looking for hope; or like Paul we do *not do what we want, but we do the very thing we hate*; or if like the disciples we keep changing our minds about what will be evidence of God we will

³ (Matthew 11:28-30).

⁴ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/07/pentecost-5-a-where-we-least-expect-god-to-be/>

believe – whatever the challenge that is facing us God reminds us that - for the chaos to stop, we need to let go of what we are expecting - to stop, let go – and probably most importantly – God is always by our side, offering rest!

"Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

Amen