

17 March 2019

Genesis 15.1-12, 17-18

Luke 13.31-35

Knowing who we are

The Film Musical *The Greatest Showman* tells the story of the American circus owner P T Barnum. He revelled in putting on a spectacle and built upon the curiosity value of people who would otherwise have been ostracised – those with dwarfism, and a bearded lady ... and a whole range of others.

But then he began to branch out and invited the opera singer Jenny Lind to be part of his show, and people from the higher social classes began to attend his shows.

After one show there was an after party for the rich and connected, and the troupe of performers assumed that they would be invited to attend. But they were shocked to find that P T Barnum, who they looked on as something of a friend and father-figure, when it boiled down to it, seemed to be ashamed of them, and told them that the party wasn't for them.

And that gave rise to this song in the musical, sung by the bearded lady (played by Keala Settle).

It is a wonderful statement of human dignity.

...

I am bruised, I am brave
This is who I'm meant to be
This is me!

This is a powerful statement made by someone who has learned to be comfortable in her own skin, despite the fact that her skin seems to make her something of an oddity among everyone else.

I am sure that this song speaks to the experience of many who find themselves at the bottom of the pile, forgotten and shunned. The message they keep on hearing from people's actions and attitudes (if not their words) is:

“Run away! No one'll love you as you are.”

And many are looking for courage to declare:

“I know that there’s a place for us, for we are glorious!”

And it is uplifting to come across people who have learned this defiant acceptance of who they are. Who have learned, against all the odds, to value themselves, and indeed to love themselves in the best possible way.

Those who are able to live accepting and valuing, ‘This is me!’

This is me ... and it’s OK!

This is me ... and there is something glorious about my humanity!

This is me ... and I won’t let you undermine my worth and my value.

While many of us would not want to trumpet it quite so loudly, I think this song represents a place where many of us would like to be – quietly confident in who we are ... knowing our place and our worth in the world, despite all of our oddities and foibles. Knowing who we are.

But it’s not always easy to get to that place.

From the experience of the bearded lady in *The Greatest Showman* to the story of Abraham in Genesis.

Abraham paves the way in the bible for helping us to understand how we might get to that place of knowing who we are ... because Abraham is God’s first step in beginning to put the world right. So, how God works in Abraham’s life is an indication of how God is going to work to put this broken world back together again.

If the theme song of the bearded lady is ‘This is me!’ - then the theme song of Abraham is voiced by God and it goes – ‘This is you!’

“I am your shield, your very great reward – This is you, strong and rich in me!” (15.1)

“Look up at the stars in the heavens ... count them ... these are your offspring. This is you and your legacy and all that you will be and can be through me!” (15.5)

“To your descendents I give this land – This is you, This is yours, this is where you belong! You have a place that is yours in this world through my gift.” (15.18)

Abraham’s life was transformed by the call of God. He began life as a wandering herder and trader in Mesopotamia ... until he heard the call of God when he was 75 years of age to uproot himself and his family from Haran and travel to Canaan, over 500 miles away.

And all the time God’s promise was that God would make Abraham’s offspring into a great nation. Only his wife at that stage had no children ... and as the years went by they continued to wait and wait.

And here in Genesis 15 we hear the promises of God reaffirmed. And God sealing those promises with a covenant – a binding commitment. “This is who I will be for you. This is who you will be with me.”

And over the long years of his travelling and wandering and waiting, Abraham learned to trust God’s promises ... and he learned to walk tall in the world, not from a sense of arrogance, nor from a sense of privilege, but because he knew who he was in God’s purposes and promises.

He wasn’t an arrogant, self-made man, but someone who knew where he belonged in the scheme of things, because God had called him, because God had opened out who he could be and who he could become, because in God he was given worth and purpose.

‘Abram believed the Lord and the Lord credited it to him as righteousness.’
(15.6)

This verse has been given all sorts of theological meanings and interpretations over the years – but at heart it is emphasising the point, that at the core of our relationship with God is trust in the God of promise.

Abraham was able to live with that quiet confidence in ‘This is me’ –because he trusted in the promise of God when God said to him ‘This is who you can be, with me and in me. This is you!’

And perhaps through Abraham we can begin to see how we can all gain that quiet trust and confidence in who we are ... not so much through turning inward and looking at ourselves, but by turning outward and discovering who we are in God.

If we simply turn inward to find that strength and confidence, we would find something of a mixed bag, because our lives are a mix of the glorious and the shameful, the bold and the timid, the whole and the broken, the hopeful and the despairing, the sensible and the distorted. What trust in God offers is a way of looking at ourselves through God's eyes ... and discovering that

- God wants to restore our dignity,
- God wants us to know ourselves as created in his image,
- God wants to give us places of worth and belonging, of purpose and of promise in this world.

He wants to make of us the best that we can be, in the midst of all of the stuff that has gone on before and is going on around us. He says, 'This is you!' so that we can say, 'This is me!'

Now we have to note that there is also a self-confidence that is not very attractive or very healthy.

In her column this week in the Guardian, *The Week in Patriarchy*, Arwha Mahdawi paints a not very flattering picture of the latest Democratic candidate for the US Presidential elections Beto O'Rourke.

She begins the article, "Lord, give me the confidence of a mediocre white man!" What she dislikes in O'Rourke is his sense of privilege, because he is "a rich kid from a well-connected family." She talks about ...

"His certainty that he's qualified for the most powerful job in the world despite his lack of experience. His belief that he is qualified for the role despite the fact that he himself has absolutely no idea what he stands for.

The only strong conviction he really seems to have is that he deserves to be president. "Man, I'm just born to be in it," he recently enthused to Vanity Fair."

Now, I don't know whether this assessment of Beto O'Rourke is a fair one or not ... but I certainly recognise the kind of person Arwha Mahdawi is speaking about. People who declare 'This is me!' but whose self-confidence comes out of a sense of entitlement or privilege, or an over-inflated sense of their own importance. This kind of self-confidence arises not from a place of knowing who we are, but actually from the opposite - from a lack of self-awareness.

And it seems to me that when we receive our worth and dignity as gifts of God, then we will hold them with a lightness of touch, and with a humility of spirit that protects our 'This is me!' from tipping over into arrogance and self-delusion.

It is important that our sense of 'this is me!' begins with our hearing God saying to us, 'This is you!'

From the story of the bearded lady in *The Greatest Showman* to the story of Abraham in the Old Testament ... and now onto the story of Jesus in the New Testament that we read from Luke 13.

This is a story in which Jesus makes it clear that he knows exactly who is.

The reading begins with the scene of some Pharisees who were apparently concerned about Jesus' safety. They had heard that Herod wanted to kill him and so they come and warn Jesus about the threat to his life.

Are these Pharisees genuinely concerned for Jesus' safety? ... Or are they trying to upset his equilibrium, put him on the back foot? We have to say that we simply don't know.

But Jesus responds with a statement that is full of enigma – in other words you have to think about what he is saying. But it is also full of clarity and purpose. "I know what I'm about."

Go tell that fox, 'I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.'

The enigmatic part is in the phrase ... "and on the third day I will reach my goal." When is the third day? What is his goal? Is today, tomorrow, the third day literal ... or is he saying that for now he has to carry on with his calling ... but that there is something beyond that that his life is all about.

But what he is clearly saying is – 'Not even Herod can shape my life. I will continue to offer healing and wholeness ... and beyond that a greater goal, a greater good.'

And then he hints at what this greater goal might be, keeping up the rhythm of 'today and tomorrow':

‘I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day- for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!’

In Jesus, we find someone who refuses to be put into anyone else’s moulds, who refuses to be manipulated by the powerful, or thrown off course by threats. Here is a man who quietly and assuredly knows what he is about.

Here is Jesus saying firmly, ‘I know what I am about. This is me!’

And he knows, because he lives his life wholly dependent on his Father – trusting his Father’s call on his life.

And even confronted with the impending rejection of Jerusalem, he remains true to who he is called to be, offering Jerusalem comfort and security:

‘O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.’

Before the threat of Herod and the hostility of Jerusalem, Jesus knows who he is called to be and what he is to be about –

- offering healing and wholeness
- breaking the grip of the demonic in people’s lives
- gathering people into the security of God’s love
- bearing the pain of rejection in order to display the openness of God’s welcome
- living with the harsh reality of today in order to bring the promise of the third day

He is about addressing the brokenness of our world ... and bearing the brokenness of our world.

He knows what he is about, because he knows what God is about

‘This is me!’ says Jesus.

‘This is God!’

And if, with Jesus, we come to know who God is – the one who heals and bears our brokenness – then we can begin to live with confidence in who we can be in this world. Though we are broken, though we are bruised, we can dare to say, ‘This is me!’

We are glorious, loved, cared for, held in God's hands. 'This is me, because this is God!'