

Walking with God

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Mark 8:31-38

So many of the epic literary stories are about journeys that take people through great peril to, hopefully, a happy ending. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* traces the journey of Christian through what is the journey of faith. J R R Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* follows the hobbit Frodo as he adventures through Middle Earth on a quest to destroy the ring of power. Tolkien writes of the journey, "It's a dangerous business...going out your door. You step on to the road and, if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to..." In Ancient Greece, Homer's *Odyssey* charts the ten-year journey of King Odysseus as he returned from the Trojan War. And if that's all a bit too esoteric for you, Captain Kirk in the first *Star Trek*: "Space, the final frontier. These are the voyages of the star-ship *Enterprise*. Its 5-year mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, (split infinitive alert) to boldly go where no man has gone before. Or in L Frank Baum's wonderful *Wizard of Oz Books* the heroine Dorothy Gale from Kansas, and her dog Toto, travels with the Scarecrow, the Tin Man and the Cowardly Lion along the Yellow Brick Road in search, ultimately, for her way home.

Travel, journey, adventure, quest, movement. It is part of our human DNA. For people of faith it is part of our spiritual DNA. The desire, sometimes even the compulsion, to be on the move. People of faith are called, are shaped to be on the move. Sometimes physically, sometimes spiritually. The faith that stands still, the faith that does not move, the faith that does not enquire, will wither and die. The journey may not be easy, the onward move may be tough, there may be setbacks on the way, but believing is about moving.

The ancient Israelites, and their rollercoaster journey from Egypt to their Promised Land. The prophets of Israel and Judah moving around the holy sites, bringing God's message to people who wanted to hear and sometimes refused to listen. The journeys of Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and with the infant Jesus to Egypt. The travels of Jesus around the Galilee, and up to Jerusalem. The itineraries of Peter and Paul and early Christians as they stumble through the Roman Empire, spreading what they believed. The two disciples on the Road to Emmaus.

And then there is Abraham, and his wife Sarah. The Patriarch and Matriarch of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Would that the great evils of conflict, particularly in Palestine and Israel and Yemen and Iraq and Iran and Syria would remember the family link. Would that those who claim to be good Jews, or Christians or Muslims in our own country, yet by their hate-speech and actions reveal their stultifying ignorance of the faith they claim to proclaim but fail to live out in their daily lives, as well as the one they denigrate.

Far away from this humble, older couple who both walked faithfully, surprisingly, maybe even slightly ironically with their God. Their history shrouded in the mists of time yet giving to the world a faith-pattern of possibility, a believing that did not occur in a vacuum. Here was a couple who questioned, even doubted, but who nevertheless continued to walk with, and work with, God.

Abraham's life was not without change, or anguish, or sacrifice. But he found himself brought back again and again to a God who continued to bring newness into the world. The childless couple who would become the ancestors of nations. The homeless couple who in their later years found a land of promise. Because with hope, with doubt, with fear, with joy, they walk before God, they walk with God, they have God as their companion along the pathway of life.

As they walked together the new relationships God wanted to forge with humanity unfold. New names are given. God becomes 'God Almighty' for the first time. Abram, 'exalted father', becomes Abraham, 'father of a multitude.' Sarai, Abram's 'princess' becomes Sarah, 'mother of the people'. "...Walk before Me, and be blameless..." God says to Abraham. God delights in this new relationship with humanity, and wanted to see His friend Abraham, and together, they will walk. Through brightness and darkness. Through despair and hope. Through endings and beginnings. And blessing will come. It will take time. It won't happen overnight. It will require resilience, and perseverance, and steadiness, and hopefulness. The promise to Abraham comes also to us. We too, in living our own lives, are called to walk before God, and to be the best person we can be, because that is how God has shaped us.

When we put our faith into practice. When we share hospitality with those around us. When we are generous with our time and our money. When we include people who are often on the edges of life. When we comfort people who are sad, or struggling, or we are simply there with them, walking with them. When we see opportunities to be kind and take them up.

At a funeral recent I found myself reusing a phrase about the person who had died that I find the best of all tributes. "She had the ability to make goodness attractive." Do you make goodness attractive? Maybe you could try, as you walk with God.

We will stumble as we walk, taking wrong paths, going backwards, standing still for too long. Peter, the leading apostle, walking with Jesus, having just called Him 'the Christ', still doesn't really understand Who this Jesus is and what He has come to do. Peter took Jesus aside, off the path, and rebuked Him for talking about His looming suffering and death. "Get behind me, Satan, for you are not on the side of God, but of men." Jesus said. Not, "walk before Me", but, "Get behind

Me." Don't tempt Me. Jesus knew where He had to walk with God, and He would not be side-tracked.

How is your journey through life this morning? I hope and pray for you that the path is smooth and bright. I hope and pray that the blessing of loved ones is close to you, and the days ahead hold laughter and delight. I hope and pray that there will be time to do the work you need to do, and time to take the time off to relax and enjoy your life. Walk with God.

But it may be that your journey through life is less easy. There may be obstacles in the way. You may have walked recently through the valley of the shadow of death. You may be labouring up a steep hill because of poor health, or frustrated plans, or being let down by people around you. You may have ground to a halt because it is all simply too much, and you don't know how to go on. Walk with God. Because God is walking with you, today.

As God is walking, still, with the embattled people of Ukraine in the horror of their unjust war inflicted on them by Russia.

As God is walking, still, with the children of Gaza, and the families of the Hamas-held Israeli hostages in that Holy Land conflict where no-one is going to have peace until everyone recognises mutual rights to a home-land.

As God is walking, still, through the corridors of Parliamentary power, where wrangles over procedure in debate, however important, are dwarfed by the need for peace in Israel-Palestine. When febrile talk about traitors and Islamists and anti-semitic rhetoric corrode the body-politic.

As God is walking, still, through political indecision about how to tackle climate change.

As God is walking, still, through hospital wards and classrooms, and shop floors, and factory sweatshops and all the places where those working in the most necessary areas of life are paid far less in than sports stars and entertainers.

As God is walking, still, through churches and cathedrals and chapels, keeping faith, and hope, and love alive in the face of so much indifference.

God has not stopped walking with us. Because in that shared forward movement, we find blessing, and hopefulness, and kindness and love. Our walking God, with His walking people.

In a moment of bitter loss in the musical Carousel, Rodgers and Hammerstein place an anthemic, that as I thought of Abraham, and Jesus, walking with God through sunshine and clouds. Some may think it a little corny, but it still speaks of that onward journey of belief and practice that will help us through life.

*When you walk through a storm
Hold your head up high
And don't be afraid of the dark
At the end of a storm
There's a golden sky
And the sweet silver song of a lark
Walk on through the wind
Walk on through the rain
For your dreams be tossed and blown
Walk on, walk on
With hope in your heart
And you'll never walk alone
You'll never walk alone*

May you, with Abraham and Sarah, with Jesus, continue your walk with God's hope in your heart in the week that lies before you.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen