

It all depends on ...

St. Brandon's

Genesis 17:1-7,15-16; Romans 4:13-end; Mark 8:31-end

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Hands up if you think England will win the six nations rugby this season. Hands up if you think Labour will win the next election. Hands up if you think Rick will become a bishop. We seem to have become a nation where opinion polls and referenda on almost anything are the done thing. 'Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?' No – let's not go there! But here's another, though this time a little more relevant to us this morning. Hands up if you think everything depends on God (and by 'everything' I mean from an answer to prayer today through to the destiny of the world). And you may have found it difficult to answer because of how the issue was phrased, or you might have wanted it to be a little more nuanced than it was.

Our reading from Genesis might be taken as saying 'everything depends on God'. He's got it all mapped out for Abraham and the world. "I will" or "I shall", spoken by God, occurs eight times in the reading. "I will make my covenant between me and you" and so forth. This is all at God's initiative and everything depends on Him.

Mmm – well. But God actually starts by saying to Abraham "walk before me, and be blameless. And [then] I will make my covenant between me and you ...". Ah, so it depends on Abraham's response. The whole plan appears to depend on whether Abraham agrees to walk before God and be blameless – to keep his side of the bargain. So it all depends on Abraham? Well, in a sense yes. God chooses to make Himself and His plan vulnerable to Abraham's response. And He does that by inviting Abraham to be open to what He is doing, to go along with Him on what might well be a risky journey, in other words to put his faith in God.

But what's the one practical thing that Abraham has to do as a result of this encounter with God if it's all to work out as God intends? (Don't be shy in answering!) Well the answer is ... make love to / with his wife Sarah! That's the only way he's going to become the ancestor of many nations in the way that God intends. Now that might seem to be quite a pleasant commission! But as Paul notes in our NT reading, Abraham was nearly 100 (or at least fairly elderly), his body was already as good as dead, and Sarah was barren, so this would have taken some believing! It might well have been a case of the spirit being willing but the flesh being weak! But "hoping against hope, he [Abraham] believed that he would become 'the father of many nations'" as Paul put it, and it happened and Sarah gave birth to Isaac (Gen. 21:1-2). And Paul's take on this is that it was all because Abraham had faith and acted on it: "... it depends on faith" says Paul. Ah, so it really does all depend on Abraham after all, not on God. Mmm – well, yes. We do see God making Himself vulnerable to Abraham's faith and his practical response to that. But Paul carries on from "For this reason it depends on faith" to say, "in order that the promise may rest on grace". In other words the foundation is actually still in God Himself; the grace of God underpins all this.

So we arrive at a point where we see that my original question, "Hands up if you think everything depends on God" was, like many such questions, a little unfair. Because you might well have wanted to say, "Yes, but. Yes, it all depends upon God, but it's a bit more complicated than that." And maybe now we're a little clearer on the "but". Yes, everything is at God's initiative, yes, everything depends on God, yes it's all founded on grace. But, God chose to invite Abraham to join with Him in realising His purposes, invited Abraham to be open to all that God was doing, to join Him on what might well be a risky journey – and thereby made Himself vulnerable to Abraham's response. It also all depended on Abraham.

And if we turn from there to our gospel reading, we see the same kind of pattern repeated. Immediately prior to our reading, Peter has declared that Jesus is the Messiah. In response to that Jesus begins to teach

his disciples about what must happen to Him – suffering, rejection, death and then resurrection. Jesus is laying out God’s plan and purpose, this is all at God’s initiative. And it all clearly depends upon Him. Jesus will do this. No one else can. And there is no other way. Which is why Peter gets a sharp ticking off when he tries to suggest that this isn’t at all the way it should all work out.

But having made it clear that this all depended on Him, Jesus then turns to both His disciples and the crowd and says those difficult words about following Him – that it will involve denying ourselves, taking up our cross, losing our lives for Jesus’ sake. In other words, it all depends on us and whether we accept what is, in effect, an invitation like the one to Abraham to be open to all that God is doing, to join Him on what might well be a risky journey, to put our faith in Him. Jesus makes Himself vulnerable not only to the chief priests and scribes and to all they will do to Him, but also to His disciples and the crowd ... and us – will we follow Him, place our trust in Him, and thereby help in realising His plan and purpose for us and the world?

So if everything depends on God, and if everything also depends on us, where does that leave us? And I want to make a suggestion which also links with what Jesus says about taking up our cross if we are to follow Him. I have always thought of that as somehow meaning carrying a cross, holding it near the base as does the crucifer in the cathedral, for example. But something that I read at the beginning of this Lent¹ made me think differently about it, made me think that the place that we are called to ‘occupy’, as it were, on the cross, is the point of intersection of the vertical and horizontal members. The vertical speaks of God, reminds us that everything depends on Him, tells us that everything rests on grace. The horizontal speaks of neighbour, those whose lives we touch for good or ill day by day. It reminds us of the world with all its pain and suffering. It reminds us too, of course, of Jesus’ arms spread wide on the cross, reaching out to neighbour and the world in love and forgiveness.

And to ‘stand’, as it were, at the centre of the cross, makes us aware of the twin demands to love God and neighbour, and to understand how costly that can be. It reminds us that Jesus came to be and to show us the love of God, a love which then for us means nothing less than a deliberate and costly giving of ourselves for the good of others and the world – a giving of our time, of our attention, of our resources, of all that we are, if needs be of our very lives themselves.²

Everything depends on God, it rests on grace. If we move away from the vertical, moving only in the horizontal plain, we are, in effect denying God, forgetting that everything depends on Him, and no longer relying on Him as the ground of our being. It’s a way of trying to save our lives by gaining the whole world, as Jesus puts it. But if we move away from the horizontal, and just want to move in the vertical plain we are denying the call to follow Christ in reaching out in costly love to neighbour and the world, in the risky journey of faith God calls us to. We are denying that everything also depends on us and our response of faith. In a way, it’s being ashamed of God, wanting Him only for ourselves, and not be willing to go with Him on a risky journey of faith into the world.

It is only at the centre of the cross that we can hold both of these, love of God and love for neighbour and the world, properly together. It is only at the centre of the cross that we hold onto the truth that everything depends on God and rests on grace, and that everything depends on us and our response of faith. So perhaps that’s for us a helpful way of thinking about what taking up of our cross means. And if so, may that be for us the place in which we stand.

Amen

¹ Michael Mayne, *Dust that dreams of glory. Reflections on Lent and Holy Week*, Canterbury Press, 2017, p.3-4.

² See *ibid.*, p.26.