*The LCA provides this sermon edited for lay-reading, with thanks to the original author.*

Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14), Year C

# The Text: Genesis 15:1-6

'When you come across a situation you don't know or understand, how does it make you feel? For many people, the natural response to the unknown is fear. The fear of the unknown, as it is often referred to: Xenophobia. Whether or not you agree or disagree with the label the reality is that our natural human response to the unknown is most often fear.

Fear of the unknown, as it is often referred to.

Xenophobia.

The Christian faith takes fear of the unknown and introduces hope so that the unknown, even though it may not be seen, it no longer creates fear.

For example, death still creates all the same emotions of grief including anger, doubt, fear, and other human emotions just as Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus.

St Paul says that that is natural. *But he also says: Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of humankind, who have no hope*.

So it appears Paul is saying that grief is part of death but that the Christian hope, brought about by faith in Christ, is different to those who grieve with no hope. That’s because without faith and hope the unknown remains unknown but faith reveals the truth.

The truth is, as Jesus said to those grieving over Lazarus’s death:

Jesus said, *"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;*

In our Old Testament reading we heard about Abraham.

Abraham’s life was about faith into the unknown.

It began when God told him to leave his family, friends and homeland and to venture where God told him to go – into the unknown.

Abraham faces his fears, and goes into the unknown, trusting God.

In today's Old Testament reading, Abraham again faces fear - fear of having no child to carry on his family name.

He is old - he and Sarah are both way past the normal age for having children - and again he is asked to have faith in God:

*"Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be."*

And Abraham believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

God invites us to have faith in him.

But what does it mean to have faith?

Our Bible reading says: faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

So it acknowledges that faith doesn’t necessarily make the unseen seen but it makes the unknown known so that we do not fear.

And so Jesus says to his disciples who are entering into unknown areas: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms.

Why did Jesus say – sell your possessions?

Because when we fear we hang on to things we can see to give us security like our possessions.

Jesus is saying – let go of them and live by faith in God.

And that is the purpose of our Baptism.

Our baptism is about living by faith.

We cannot “see” the effects of our baptism.

Being baptised doesn’t mean you’re going to be employed from school to retirement.

Being baptised doesn’t mean you won’t experience difficulties in your relationships.

Being baptised doesn’t mean you’re not going to get sick or a terminal disease.

Being baptised doesn’t mean you won’t experience the grief of losing a loved one.

Being baptised does however allow us to live knowing that our life is heading towards eternal life in heaven.

Being baptised allows us to live without the fear of what the world can do to us.

The world limits our vision of life to the physical surrounds which frighten us.

As we look around we see war, famine, disease and all sorts of things that constrain our joy and freedom.

We live wondering when the next terrorist attack will be.

We live wondering if we’ll have enough to retire on.

We live wondering if our children will be able to buy their own home in the future.

We live wondering if we’ll have a job to go to tomorrow.

Being baptised and living by faith doesn’t mean those things won’t affect us physically.

But it means that those things don’t define our living.

Instead our lives are lived looking forward to the unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.

The difficulties and sufferings are only in this life which does not even register compared to the eternal life waiting for us.

What is 120 years – the maximum age God has set which most people don’t come close to – compared to eternity.

As St Paul once said: I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. (Romans 8:18)

Sadly too many Baptisms today are neglected.

Maybe someone you know – or someone from your family has seemingly neglected their baptism.

But the blessing of baptism is that God never neglects our baptism.

Abraham had to wait a lifetime to see the promise made to him fulfilled.

Abraham was 100 years old when he became the father of Isaac.

In fact Abraham had given up and decided to take matters into his own hands by having a son with Hagar when Ishmael was born.

So not even his lack of faith would undo the promise of God.

So too when those we have seen baptised in our congregation don’t return we continue to put our faith in God that he is going to honour his promise to them when he said – I am with you always till the end of the age – even if you are not always with me.

That’s the hope we do not see but which we cling to.

So our Baptism means we don’t live in fear but we live waiting for our call home to heaven whenever that might be.

We don’t have to worry when that is or what happens along the way.

As Jesus says: be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks.

So cherish your baptism as it removes your fears by the promise that whoever believes and is baptised will be saved (Mark 16:16).

Don’t be guided by the things you see but allow your baptism to give you the confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

Sadly we don’t see our eternal life but death and destruction.

But do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom of heaven.