

Sermon preached by the Rev'd. Cynthia Jackson, St. Mary's
Wimbledon, 2nd Sunday in Lent, 16.3.14.

Many years ago Father Geoffrey Rider, a priest, at St Matthew's Church, preached a sermon on the importance of a 'comma'. Not just any comma, but the one placed in the words of the Nicene Creed:

"We believe in one God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, *of all that is, seen and unseen.*"

The important phrase is; "... *of all that is, seen and unseen.*" As Christians we do not believe just in what we can see our Christian faith is dependent on a God whom we cannot see. This is true of people of all faiths and was especially true of Abram who would become Abraham.

In the letter to the Hebrews we read:

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen..." (Hebrews 11:1)

Abram, although 75 years old, was obedient to God's command to leave his home and go to a strange country. God promised that he and his descendants would become a great nation. To move out into the unknown to leave your home does require great faith, especially if you do not know where your destination will be. Today refugees from many countries know this only too well.

I expect many of us will know what it is like to move house; how stressful and worrying it can be, even when we know where our new home will be. I have friend who hopes to move to a new retirement complex. Although she can see it being built and has faith that it will be finished later this year, it is not easy for her to relax at the present time, as there are still many uncertainties ahead.

St Paul in his letter to the Romans emphasises that the promise that would come to Abraham and his descendants came not through the Law of Moses but through the righteousness of faith. His descendants would become a great nation. This nation will be made up of Gentiles and Jews.

This last week has seen the death of two public figures firstly Bob Crowe leader of the RMT Union, since 2002, and a passionate speaker on behalf of his members. He had great faith in the causes

he fought for and was not afraid to challenge rules and regulations that he thought were unjust. Secondly the death of Tony Benn, a politician of many years standing and respected by people of all political parties. Again a man who was passionate about what he believed in and not afraid to work to change the law regarding membership of the House of Commons. When he became the 2nd Viscount Stansgate, on the death of his father, he was barred from being a Member of Parliament. He campaigned for the law to be changed and following the passing of the Peerage Act 1963 he could take his seat in the Lower House. Both men had great faith and passion for what they believed in.

Our faith and passion is in a different direction our faith is in God's promise to us fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ.

God's promise is like a gift, the gift of grace that is for all people Jews and Gentiles alike and that means you and me.

Our faith is dependent upon us turning away from ourselves, and turning to God and Jesus as the only source of new life.

In our gospel reading we hear of Nicodemus a distinguished Pharisee, who as a ruler of the Jews sat on the supreme Council of the Sanhedrin. Although Nicodemus was a more liberal Pharisee, open to new teachings and interpretations and attracted to Jesus' signs we do not know if he was a "secret believer" in Jesus. Nevertheless later on in John's Gospel we read that Nicodemus defended Jesus from unjust prejudiced accusations and joins with Joseph of Arimathea in providing Jesus with a decent burial. Nicodemus despite his knowledge of the Jewish law does not understand the words of Jesus when he talks about being born again of water and the spirit, in John 3:5.

John the Baptist had baptised with water, but Jesus would bring new life to all that believed in him. This new life is compared to a wind that blows and although we can hear the sound we do not know where it comes from. This life-giving

wind is very different from the devastating wind that so many communities experienced during this winter. Whereas physical winds brought destruction, the wind of the spirit of God brings new life.

You may have encountered a certain type of Christian who asks you the question, ... "*Have you been baptised in the Spirit...?*" Or they can even talk about being '*slain in the Spirit*', which means being so overcome that the individual falls to the floor and perhaps talks in tongues. This type of questioning can be quite an off-putting, particularly if you do not understand what they are talking about! Often the reference is to a Damascus road type conversion or experience of the Holy Spirit, changing their lives in a moment of time.

However for many of us the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives has been a more gradual experience. Looking back on my own life I can see that the Holy Spirit was nudging me towards Ordination, but it was a gradual experience.

So we experience this, "*Wind of change*" to borrow a phrase from Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, as life giving.

This wind of the Spirit invigorates and enlivens us in our faith. We can see this wind of the Spirit working through the people we encounter every day. But we have to nurture this faith like we would nurture and care for newly planted seedlings. We would not expect plants to grow without there being fed and watered and weeds removed. Our faith is nurtured, as I said last week, by prayer and bible study and by the life-giving power of the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

So we are called this Lent to go forward in faith, trusting in God and our Lord Jesus Christ, and opening our lives to the power of the Holy Spirit to invigorate us with new life. God alone knows what the result will be! **Amen.**