

Genesis 15: 1-12; 17-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13: 31-end

When I sat down to look at our three readings for today the thing that really struck me is just how full of stress they are. Abraham is anguished about who's going to be his heir and this encounter with God which is more like a nightmare in lots of ways is hard to understand; Paul is writing from prison about all the hostility and persecution his readers would have been only too familiar with; and Jesus in our Gospel, well for him the scene is set – it's Jerusalem, the place where prophets die. And we don't know whether the pharisees want him to get away because these are maybe some pharisees who supported him or because they're terrified that Jesus is on a collision course with authority which is going to bring the whole weight of Roman power down on their heads.

So lots of stress. It's all very dark and where's God to be found in times like this. If you've been watching the news this week, you could be forgiven for asking the same question. There were appalling scenes from Syria as the wives of ISIS fighters and their children were taken on to buses, their kids obviously terrified, as a terrible sandstorm swirled around them – it was like a scene from hell. And of course there's been the week in parliament. Lots of heat, but not much light, no matter what you originally voted for – not to mention the news that some of our politicians have cashed in on the situation, almost gambling on the nation's pain to make personal fortunes running into millions of pounds.

But worst of all what do we make of the horror that took place in Christchurch, New Zealand, this week? And the perpetrator live-streaming his actions on to Facebook as he killed innocent people in cold blood.

One of the old prayer book collects reminds us that “we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves” and that would certainly seem to be the case. There are so many situations where we just seem to be helpless. It seems we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves.

But God's answer to Abraham is to show that his desire is to share in all our anxiety and our mess and our pain. The sacrifice eerily watched by birds of prey – vultures in some translations – is significant. The gruesome description of the parts of the sacrificed animal which were set apart, with a path between them is an echo of how ancient covenants were made. Walking between these dismembered remains was a way of saying I place all my commitment, my very self, behind this agreement. Here's where God steps in because the fire-pot and the flaming torch that pass between the pieces of sacrificed flesh, these represent God himself.

It's God who shoulders this huge responsibility. For Abraham, who can only see his problems, this is God's ratifying of his promise that Abraham's heirs will be as many as the stars in the sky and grains of sand on the seashore. And again, like we saw last week, Abraham is made to remember: I am the Lord your God who brought you up from Ur of the Chaldeans. Remember, and in your remembering, find hope, and here in this terrifying darkness, this strange dream, God acts out his faithfulness to his promise. He himself will bear the weight of this covenant.

Paul, in the darkness of prison, finds a similar way through. Yes, we're surrounded by so much difficulty and opposition – no-one knew that more than Paul – but our citizenship is in heaven. And he paints this almost ecstatic picture of the Risen Christ, who will transform the body of our humiliation (all the terrible things we might be undergoing) into something new and full of hope. So what he's saying is, this is how the world is and it's probably always going to be like this, but turn your eyes towards Jesus and see the light that pierces every darkness, no matter what.

Finally, in Jesus, we see him take that strange covenant sealed in blood, in sacrifice, taken to a level Abraham could never have imagined. Because in Jesus it's for all people, for all time. The scene of this Gospel opens with pharisees playing religious politics and trying to get Jesus out of the picture before he can do any more damage. Off-stage, but soon to be centre stage, is Herod, the wildest politician of them all. There will be an unholy collusion of religious power and political power and Jesus will be the victim. The one who sees how we suffer, all of us in every generation, and wants to gather us under his wings like a mother hen with her chicks, he will be the sacrifice.

But he will be the sacrifice that transforms. He'll be the victim who becomes victor. The broken Christ on the Cross will become the Christ who reigns from the Cross – which is the Christ we have before us here. And this is the victim who shares in the suffering of Muslims in Christchurch and of all victims everywhere.

So, three readings that hold up a mirror to how the world is, how we are, but they all point to the faithfulness of God. Which is why, no matter what's been in the news in any given week, no matter what's been happening in our own lives, tough as they can be, testing of our faith as they can be, we consciously – as Christians – we turn our eyes towards Jesus, and beyond the darkness we see hope.