

Proper 15 / 8 Trinity Year C – St Helen's, Abingdon
10 August 2025



Genesis 15.1-6 / Hebrews 11.1-3, 8-16 / Luke 12.32-40

All of these died in faith without having received the promises...

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – *Amen*

A CLEAR DAY, MOSTLY SUNNY, and very warm in Abingdon; our children still out of school for a few days; we have, thank heaven, a Team Rector designated, and a date for her installation, and we have Father Paul among us for another couple of months. Our congregations are stable and healthy, maybe even showing signs of growing. Things around St Helen's are looking *pretty good*. It's a *pretty good* day, sisters and brothers, and as the Psalmist says, 'Let us rejoice and be glad in it!'

That qualifier, though, that '*pretty good*' covers up a lot of sadness, even misery. This morning's readings talk about our great good hope in God, but in the shadow, out of the spotlight, our readings (and our love for our friends in the congregation, and for humanity in the world abroad) testify that the picture isn't *all* sweetness and light.

In Genesis, Abraham cautiously reminds God about this: 'It was a great promise, Lord, and you may not have noticed this, but years and years after Sarai and I left Ur of the Chaldees to fulfil our end of the bargain, we're still childless. I can't do better for an heir than some character named Eliezer of Damascus; a guy without even a *speaking role* in the Bible will inherit my whole estate. You promised more children than the stars in the sky, more than the sand on the beach, but our tent

stands empty and quiet.’

And in today’s psalm, the Lord keeps an eye on *whom*? On those who wait in hope for his steadfast love, to deliver their soul from death and to feed them in time of famine. In the epistle, we hear that the saints of the Old Testament all died *without* receiving God’s promises. Even Jesus reminds us that in this world thieves break in, and moths consume our precious things. Here we struggle along in uncertainty, we watch as pests and vermin flourish while we falter. Here we perish without receiving God’s promise of our heart’s dearest desire. The good things for which we wait and hope remain *unseen*. And we won’t even talk about politics. It’s a pretty-good world, *maybe*, if we just ignore the decay and the suffering and the misery.

Our hearts know all this. Our hearts wince when some well-meaning visitor says, ‘It’s all for the best,’ or ‘God has a *special* plan for you,’ or ‘Have faith,’ as though if God plans to build HS2 over the heartbreak of my loved ones, that their pain doesn’t count, that it’s ‘part of a plan’ about which we should put on rose-coloured glasses and not dwell on our dear ones’ suffering and loss. That’s not *faith*! That’s some brand of hollow cheeriness, bought at the cost of the almighty love that binds our souls to one another—the kind of love that Jesus himself taught us. When Jesus saw where his road was leading, he didn’t say, ‘It’s all for the best,’ or ‘Buck up, disciples!’; he cried in agony, ‘Take this cup from me.’

If we open our eyes, we can see broken hearts and wounded spirits, a world in bondage to destruction, groaning in travail. Scripture talks that way not because St Paul and St Luke and the Psalmist were a bunch of gloomy Gus-es who needed a ‘Have a Nice Day’ button stuck on their tunics. They have a spiritual *point*: the point that if we expect the world where we *pay rent*, and *labour* for sustenance, and love and *lose* and *grieve*, if we expect *that* world to have all happy endings, then we’re singing out of the wrong hymnal. Our stories, the stories of love and birds and trees

and worlds, all these wither and perish. And indeed, some of us have the un-asked-for condition of feeling more deeply into the grim clouds of pain than the rest of us. And don't tell me that's weakness or self-indulgence; you're talking about my family; you're talking about our brothers and sisters, in our church.

What we hear from Gaza, from Ukraine, from Sudan, from the United States, what we *can* see scares us, tears us, maybe it even rips our souls from the grasp of mortal life. And yet, what bodily eyes *can't* see *catches* us when we fall, *holds* us when we shiver, *draws us onward* when we lose our way. What we *can't* see, sometimes not even in a glass darkly, is hope, and faith.

People sometimes talk about *losing* our hope, *losing* our faith, but the story of our fumbling humanity and our loving God only works because it's the other way around, because hope and faith *won't lose us*. God's grace doesn't give us short-answer quizzes on the extent of our hope, grace doesn't get out spiritual sphygmomanometers to test the blood pressure of our faith. If we have to earn it, it ain't grace. Grace comes to us, *latches onto* us, and it *will not* depart from us.

And still we can't *see* it. On good days, we catch the backwash of grace in the chords of an anthem, in the scent of the forest, in the unchosen, unearned love of our devoted friends. And on bad days—on bad days, we see the 'pretty-good' world perishing, in bondage to decay.

By all means, grieve for the perishing world, but remember that our very strongest efforts cannot *themselves* transform it. We put patches here and there, we must *always* give our energies toward helping, caring, toward aligning our lives, our way, with God's way of life and peace and abundance. We reach out to extend to others the love that God has shown us, and to make our earnest offering of time, of intensity, of love point toward a grace that eludes our grasp. Reaching out to one another, our lives tell the story of a different kind of world, a world not of

bondage and mortality but of *freedom*, a freedom so *rich* and *strong* and *captivating* that you *can* taste it, you *can* see it eddying all around us, you *can* hear its melody. *Healing* one another, our lives preach the gospel of that better world. *Giving* to one another, our lives sing the holy song that reminds us that *here* we have no home town, *here* we have no safe haven, *here* we duck and grimace and if we can, we laugh, and if we must we cry, but we are strangers and foreigners to a world of decay.

But we *live*, truly *live*, somewhere *different*: not on cruel streets, neither in a bleak wasteland nor among dark Satanic mills. Though we do not *see* it, although sometimes we can't *imagine* it, even though sometimes we *disbelieve* it with all the fury of heartbreak and rage, we don't live *here*, but we *live* in a world of truth, of love, of peace, of life boundless and abundant, of life that *will not let us go*. Here we have no city, but we belong to eternity, to truth, to the City of our God, glorious, radiant, joyous with the gaiety of all God's children, as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore, all together at last.

That city we can't see this morning; what we *do* see is a *pretty-good* world, one that's ragged, ravelling and threadbare, and one that doesn't smell just right (especially in Westminster). But though we hope for what we *can't* see, we *can* show this perishing pretty-good world the direction we're headed: by holding one another tight, when we're needy, when we're lonely, when we have joy to *share*. We *can show* that we desire a *better* country, that is, a heavenly one, by hanging onto one another, by refusing to let disagreements sour the love that draws us along and brings us together. We *can pray*, tuning our souls to God's *compassion* and healing *mercy*. We *can look right into* this world's pain, and answer it with relentless *kindness*. We can *pass along* the promise that we are not made for perishing, we are not made for sorrow and grief, but we are made for the wild, free joy of communion in love with one another, with our world, with our God. We can *sing*, with hearts and hands and voices, a

glorious song that will ring from tree to tree and from Yr Wyddfa to Beinn Nibheis to Uluru to Sagarmatha to Kilimanjaro, a song that will reach the eternal hearing of our friends who have gone ahead of us, a proud hymn of hope and faith and love that will echo forward to our heirs, as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand who come along after we too, at our ends, go home.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit—

Amen