

Year B

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Remember the words inscribed on the
headstone of Joy Gresham, the wife of C.S.
Lewis' that I referred to last Sunday:

“Here the whole world (stars, water, air,
And field, and forest, as they were
Reflected in a single mind)

Like cast off clothes was left behind
In ashes, yet with hopes that she,
Re-born from holy poverty,
In lenten lands, hereafter may

Resume them on her Easter Day.”¹

O, how we long for the Easter Day and we long to exit the lenten lands.... But we can't head straight from our enjoyment of Christmas delights and onto Easter Day. We can't do it and so we shouldn't try. The season of Lent shares the liturgical colour purple with the season of Advent. But the four weeks of Advent are very different in feel and tempo to the six weeks of Lent. Advent is over in a flash of frenetic activity and Lent drags its feet like a rainy weekend. Abram and Sarai in the Genesis' text today are very

¹ <http://oxfordinklings.blogspot.co.uk/2009/11/oxford-crematorium.html>

much like lenten folk. Abram is 99 years old and his wife, Sarai is about 90. Twenty-four years have elapsed since Abram first heard God's promise. What would have happened to Mary, the mother of Jesus, if she had to wait twenty-four years for Jesus to be born? She would have had grey hairs! Nothing happened quickly in Genesis and so Abram and Sarai are the people of the long, slow, reflective lenten times. We need to linger with them to allow ourselves time to reflect on the significance of God's promises to us. In all likelihood, it will not be many years before the reign of our Queen, Elizabeth,

comes to an end. She may be blessed with Abraham's years but it is more likely that she will not. At this time her successor will, of course, be her eldest son Charles. King Charles III? - I wonder! I read the following recently:

“Prince Charles was nine when he was given the title the Prince of Wales. He's now 68 and is the longest-serving heir apparent in British history. As speculation around the day that he inherits the throne gains momentum, questions around his future title are bubbling up. Will we be welcoming the reign of King Charles III?”

Back in 2005, multiple reports said the Prince had discussed giving up the title Charles III because of unfortunate associations with previous monarchs named Charles. (Charles I was the only member of the monarchy to be tried and executed for treason, and his son, Charles II, who was known for his legendary love life, ruled during a particularly nasty bout of the plague and the Great Fire of London.)

According to The Guardian, the Prince, who was christened Charles Philip Arthur George, held private talks with “trusted friends” about the possibility of using his third

middle name and reigning as George VII. And former Buckingham Palace press spokesman Dickie Arbiter said by using the name George, Charles would be paying tribute to the both his grandparents.

"It would not just be a tribute to his grandfather [King George VI], but a sort of loving memory to his late grandmother, whom he absolutely adored," Arbiter told the BBC at the time.

But Clarence House quickly denied these claims. "No decision has been made and it will be made at the time," Charles'

representatives said in response to the news.”²

We will have to wait and see. But what is interesting and relevant to the passage in Genesis today is the concept of a change of name to mark a change of destiny. All the principle characters receive a new name in our Genesis text, including God Himself. God referred to Himself as El-Shaddai for the first time in Scripture. El-Shaddai is often translated as God Almighty; it may mean more specifically ‘God of the Mountains’. Abram becomes Abraham and Sarai becomes

² <http://www.townandcountrymag.com/society/tradition/a10021776/prince-charles-name-change-king/>

Sarah. There is an ancient tradition at baptisms where the candidate would be given a new name too. In the Acts of St. Balsamus, who died AD 331, there is an early example of the connection between baptism and the giving of a name. "By my paternal name", this martyr is said to have declared, "I am called Balsamus, but by the spiritual name which I received in baptism, I am known as Peter."³ We use the term "Christian name" to refer to a person's first name but historically that implied that the name was given at the point of infant

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_name

baptism. Jack will be christened, or baptised, this morning and he will not receive a new name but the name that has been chosen for him will be used throughout the rite of initiation and so becomes in the fullest sense of the term, his Christ name, his Christian name. The covenant that God has made with creation through his Son Jesus is brought to mind and applied specifically in the naming of Jack before all of you present with God's spirit: with blessing and promise come naming and covenant. All of this is achieved by God. This covenant with Abraham and his

descendants is different from the unilateral covenant made with the created order after the Flood. Here with Abraham and his descendants there is a requirement that they worship El-Shaddai exclusively. You see, Abraham lived in an age where multiple gods were worshipped by different peoples in different locations. Here there is one God promising one people-group a multitude of nations spread throughout the world. Such a God demands exclusive worship. There is no room for a return to religious pluralism. And yet, of course, we know that's exactly the trap that the people fell into. We might

have expected the covenant with Abraham to be declared null and void but we find quite the opposite. Instead of withdrawing his favour God expands his promise.

Charles Spurgeon and Joseph Parker led churches in London in the 19th century. On one occasion, Parker commented on the poor condition of children admitted to Spurgeon's orphanage. It was reported to Spurgeon however, that Parker had criticised the orphanage itself. Spurgeon blasted Parker the next week from the pulpit. The attack was printed in the newspapers and became the talk of the town. People flocked to

Parker's church the next Sunday to hear his rebuttal. "I understand Dr. Spurgeon is not in his pulpit today, and this is the Sunday they use to take an offering for the orphanage. I suggest we take a love offering here instead." The crowd was delighted. The ushers had to empty the collection plates 3 times. Later that week there was a knock at Parker's study. It was Spurgeon. "You know Parker, you have practiced grace on me. You have given me not what I deserved, you have given me what I needed."⁴

⁴ Moody Monthly, December, 1983, p. 81.

God's covenant promise led him to name his son Jesus, 'God saves', and to take his son to the Cross, the Grave and the Skies that the promise remained unshakeable. That's grace and it's that grace we celebrate today as we present young Jack for baptism.

Amen.