

## Sermon 18 February 2024 'Going the extra mile' (Lent 1)

**Genesis 24:15-27 Mark 1:21-27**

I want to focus on the Genesis reading, but first just a comment on our Gospel reading. We read of Jesus casting out an evil spirit. Throughout the three years of his ministry, Jesus spent a huge amount of time healing people. Last week we looked at the healing of a leper by Jesus. A few verses after this passage, we read, *'Jesus healed a great number of sick people who had many different kinds of diseases.'* Mark 1:34. The demands on both his time and his energy were huge, but Jesus never refused anyone. If anyone was prepared to go the extra mile, it was him. That is what I want to talk about this morning, but in the context of our Genesis reading.

I want to give you three words this morning. These three words can change your approach to life, and will inevitably bring you reward. The three words are 'and then some.' Do what is required, 'and then some.' In other words, be prepared to go the extra mile. Become an 'and then some' person and life will reward you.

Interestingly, the origin of the expression, 'to go the extra mile,' lies with Jesus, as do many of the expressions in our English language. It's from the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:41: *'If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles.'* This refers to a law which gave a Roman soldier on the march the right to grab any passing Jewish citizen and demand that he carry his kit for a mile. Jesus wanted his followers to show a spirit of charity and helpfulness by offering to carry it for another mile.

So back to the Genesis reading. Abraham, the father of Israel, is at this point, an old man. His wife has died and it is time for his son, Isaac, to be married.

This is an important deal. The whole future of the people of Israel relied upon this marriage because they were all going to be descendants of Isaac. Abraham had to find a great wife. She had to be someone who could be the mother of these children, raise the offspring and begin to shape a whole people. But how was he going to find a wife for Isaac? There were no single bars in those days, no on-line dating!

They had a custom in those days, and the custom was that the parents would arrange the marriage for the son. The parents would scour the countryside, find a good candidate, come home and say to the son, 'This is whom you are going to marry.' So this is what Abraham did, though he actually called upon his servant to do the hard yards for him. He called his most trusted servant and explained, 'My time has almost come. My son, the future of Israel, needs a wife, and she needs to be a person of flawless character. Go and find her.'

The servant accepted this commission and assembled a caravan of ten camels, laden with gifts. He went to a city called Nahor, and had the camels kneel down while he stood by a well outside the town. He began to pray, since he didn't know what else to do. He prayed, 'God, grant me success on this mission. I need a sign from you that you are with me on this. When the young women come here to the well, I will say, "Would you get me some water?" Let one of them say, "I will get you a drink, and water for your camels as well." That will be the sign that she is the one.'

And so he waited. Among the people coming and going was a young woman named Rebekah. The Bible says she was a woman of pure character and very fair to look upon. The phrase used in Hebrew was 'she was a righteous babe.' My Hebrew is a little scratchy and that is actually a loose translation!

When Rebekah came, she lowered her jar into the well and gave it to the servant to drink. When he finished drinking, she said, 'I will draw water for your camels too until they have finished drinking.'

Now here's the point. Do you have any idea how much a thirsty camel can drink? One camel at the end of a journey can drink up to 130 litres of water. Do you remember how many camels were in the caravan? Ten. So that is 1300 litres of water.

So here is a guy standing by a well, who asked a girl, a total stranger, 'Can I have a drink of water?' 'Sure,' she said, 'and I will also pull up, by myself, another 1300 litres of water for your camels.' That is one tremendous girl, in more ways than one.

Here's the story. Rebekah did everything that reasonably could be expected of her, and then some. It's the 'and then some' that made all the difference. It changed her life. She became the wife of Isaac and the mother of his descendants.

So we come to the issue of Lent. What should be our approach? How should we best use this important time of our Christian year? It is a time in which we are told we should be reflecting on where we are in our Christian journey, a time when we should be focusing on our faith and be attempting to strengthen our faith through increasing our focus on prayer, reading or even charitable outreach. But that's easier said than done.

It's a bit like New Year resolutions – we start off with very good intentions but the busyness and distractions of everyday life slowly take over and we soon find ourselves back to where we were. My advice, for what it is worth, my recommendation would be, yes, do something, but keep it reasonably small and simple. If it is a focus on prayer, then my suggestion is not, in this case, follow the example of Jesus and spend half the night in prayer. You might possibly manage it once but you are certainly not going to manage it on a regular basis. However, that extra 10 minutes each day will make a world of difference.

In the end it is a personal choice. We are all different and we relate to God in our own personal way. One thing I ask you to keep in mind over this Lent period is try and be a 'and then some person.' Be prepared to go the extra mile. You will make an impact, you will make a difference, and hopefully this will become a part of your persona and your approach to life throughout the remainder of the year. In the end, this is really the purpose of Lent – that any changes we are able to make become part of who we are throughout the year. This will strengthen our relationship with God, and hopefully go some way towards making us better people.

It does require reflecting on those areas or aspects where we might improve, and then committing to change. It is called 'repentance', and repentance is a hallmark of Lent. Only through repentance can we change and move forward. Oprah Winfrey puts it so very well, '*We can't become what we need to be by remaining where we are.*' Or as Ernest Hemingway said, '*True nobility is being superior to your former self.*'

I wish you a formative and rewarding Lent. May it be a time of spiritual and personal growth. Amen.