

Sacred Journeys, Sacred Spaces...
Sermon on Genesis 12:1-9 & 13:1+14-18

Sisters and brothers,

“Sacred Journey, Sacred Spaces...” has been the theme of our Weekend Away in Austria. I have just returned from it this morning. The rest of the group is still there.

The theme had emerged some weeks ago from my strong desire to deepen my everyday faith life and spirituality.

I'd always taken much from travelling, walking, running – as some of you may know -. And all of a sudden, with a disabled family member to look after, so much in my life had changed.

I discovered that the word journey has not only to do with actual travelling but also with a movement that happens within a person, with matters of the heart and the mind.

“Journey” is a word to describe the real mobility of people as it occurs so often in Biblical stories. And “journey” is an image with which we often describe our whole life story – whether it is full of physical moves or not.

And reflecting on “journeys”, especially the sacred ones that have a lot to do with our faith and our relationship with a God who is calling and leading his people, Abraham came to my mind: a classic figure who in the name of God is constantly on the move...

The biblical passages which we have just heard from the Old Testament are only the beginning of a long story of a journey of Abraham and Sara, Lot and many others. It is all about journeys and altars, old places and new places, places to leave and places to aim for...

...not because Abraham is seeking the adventure but because his God is calling him.

In Genesis 12 we are told a simple but nevertheless powerful story:

God speaks – Abraham listens – and sets off. As if this was the easiest thing on earth: to understand a divine call and then on the spot leave everything that once was meaningful and important and expose yourself to the unfamiliar and unknown .

Abraham did it. Abraham set off - - - only he is mentioned; only he has a choice to react. There is no word of Sara... no word of Lot... they are just taken along – just as anybody and anything else that belongs to a rather large household of a Nomad leader.

We could certainly be kept busy with that for a while. It would be worth it: searching after the points of view, the opinions and emotions, the doubts and uncertainties of those who were never asked but were just expected to follow. But we can also remember and see that today's narration is the result of a patriarchal way of telling stories which were only focussing on leading male figures. The "minor" characters are hidden from our view although they have definitely played remarkable roles in the life and journey of the main character.

Abraham, Sara and Lot set off with all they have and with all those who are related to them. They follow a goal which is not clearly described to them. They arrive at Canaan. They build an altar and move on.

Later on they build another altar and move on again...

In between a famine forces them to find refuge in Egypt. Besides Jacob and his sons this is another family in the Bible that seeks asylum and finds refuge in Egypt.

Eventually they return back to the altar which they had built last; and they separate... they decide to from now on go different ways, because the country couldn't possibly feed them all.

Abraham and Sara arrive at Mamre, where Abraham builds yet another altar... I don't believe for a moment that Abraham builds his altars in order to mark a property and try to own the land; no. He simply builds his altars as an expression of his relationship to the God who is with him on this journey.

The long story of Abraham's journey is only one of millions in the history of humankind:

People set off together, they separate, they flee from hunger and return, they fight and cut off relationships, they are searching for a place to stay and bread to eat.

And all that is always happening in the light – or in the shadow sometimes? – of God's promise of blessing.

Abraham's and Sara's story reflects the lives and journeys of so many people then and now: leaving behind the familiar and walking into the unknown.

God's mission for his people is to live here and there, settle in and move on – locally, spiritually and emotionally.

In order to be a blessing to the world, it seems that God's people have to be on the move.

Please, don't get me wrong:

I am not saying we all have to leave and move on from here... I think some of us have already travelled much - even too much in their lives. Surely the word moving refers also to an intellectual or a spiritual mobility that affects relationships, commitments, contracts and so on...

Nevertheless true discipleship is definitely connected with taking on a risk and searching anew where our faith is leading us.

People are changing... situations... societies... political circumstances are changing – and sometimes one has to turn one's back on something old or something that has grown cold and risk the journey into something new. This can surely cause pain, but it can also liberate and free, and open our eyes to a world that holds so much more in store than we would have ever imagined.

Talking so much about uncertainty, moving and changing it becomes clear when we are on the move, we also need places – or spaces – to feel safe, become still and have a break.

Not necessarily real places where we stay for long, maybe just moments, spots or thoughts in which we remember our roots, in which we are reassured of our mission and strengthened by God's blessings. Places from which we can again set off – strengthened, comforted and full of courage and love for life.

Abraham is building altars – not only those in our biblical passages of today but many more in other places, too. He establishes places to thank God for being with him and blessing him.

There he reassures himself and those who are travelling with him of God's never ending care. He goes back to these places at certain times in his life or stages of his journey.

He creates and values these places where one cannot forget but must remember God's story with us all and where one can renew one's aims and goals and purposes in life.

Such places and such experiences have always been important to people: they allow oneself to keep still, have a break, lay down the heavy burdens, maybe change direction and then carry on. We all need moments where we can express our needs and our pain, share our questions, our frustrations and fears, and pour our hearts out to others... and then be assured of God's presence all around us. We need these moments where we can hear that God is blessing us over and over again and wants us to be a blessing.

I take Abraham's altars as places where he did exactly that: he remembered God's blessing that was promised to him and his children and their children, and he rooted himself again in the fact that he was sent out to be a blessing to the world.

And Abraham's sacred places made me think of my sacred spaces:

It is so true – there are places in this world, journeys to travel, paths to walk, that are sacred. They are sacred because they bring us closer to God. They help us meet the divine outside us and within us.

Such places are magic. They enchant us. They fill us with energy.

Some do really exist; some of them I carry as an image within me, a memory of their charm and their atmosphere.

It is the pictures of sacred spaces, the memories of sacred journeys that help me and enable me to walk on and survive on even painful roads.

I personally need both: I need the actual sacred place or space somewhere in this world, as a point in history, as a part of and an experience in my life story. And I need the memory of them which change and shape my life forever.

Last summer, in the most difficult hours after Nicolas' accident in this huge hospital of Murnau, I sometimes only survived and remained mentally sane because I was bearing images of happiness and peace within me that prevented me from losing my mind and being swallowed up by the pain and despair of the situation there.

Places like the North Yorkshire Moors, and my memories of walking across them, the memory of the cool air within the cloisters of Iona Abbey in Scotland, the magic power of that centre point in the labyrinth of the Schlehdorf monastery, the gushing waters of the water fall near my favourite hamlet in the South of

France, the sound of the church family's singing before my mind's eye and in my mind's ear... these were all things that kept my going.

None of the places I could go to at that time – apart from the church family ☺ - and how I needed that: being with you here in church and clinging to the last glimpse of hope while we sang together “Great is thy faithfulness” and other songs... It was as if being in touch with you, with your joys and also with your pains, kept me alive.

That ...and the memory of my most beloved places, the fact that I could vividly picture them, helped me often to raise my heart and soul above the awful situation of the intensive care unit with its machines and sounds and beeps. My memories, the images of beauty and abundance in my heart, and my ability to share them with Nicolas, helped us both go on “spiritual journeys”, visit sacred spaces, and be nourished and sustained through this experience. We made imaginative walks through Cornwall, heard the storks chatter in Poland, felt the coolness of the old brick walls of San Galgano in Tuscany and tasted the sweetness of the ice cream on the Plaza in Arezzo. With all those memories we dreamed small dreams of happiness against the cruel and threatening reality of the cold and grey hospital ward and Nicolas' uncertain future.

Sacred places in nature had become sacred spaces within our hearts. And some times just a tiny keepsake helped to keep the memories alive: an angel from Schlehdorf, the cross from Iona, the postcard from San Galgano, a stone, a seed, a piece of something to look at, to wrap our hand round, something to hold onto...

It has become so important to me to reflect on how I can focus on what nourishes me and lifts me up while fear and pain and darkness are all around.

I have become grateful for every happy and peaceful image within me. I am glad about the opportunities to travel, to listen to music, to read prayers, poems, books, to talk to people, and enjoy the silence, to create something beautiful, touch flowers, smell the grass, feel the wind in my face because all those experiences have put me in touch with the holy and are helping me to survive on the harsh and dark side of life.

Abraham built altars on hard journeys. And my interest went more and more towards finding out, how I, how we all can actually lead our thinking and praying on paths that nourish and sustain us in a way that lasts – lasts even in the sadness and darkness of life.

How can I root peace, calm and happiness so deeply within myself that I can still feel them when the heart seems to break? How can I grow and fulfil my true self? How can I find healing and wholeness? Hold fast to the promise of God and believe in his blessings? How can I relate to the world, the people around me, and how do I relate to God at all times?

Motivated through Abraham and his altars I wanted to find out and explore how I could find a way that helps me practically in making the ordinary and the everyday paths and tasks a way to and with God. And while searching I discovered the writings of a 6th century monk.

St Benedict wrote a faith guide for his household and all its demands: preparing food, looking after the guests, earning a living, caring for property and land,

educating the young ones, tending the sick etc etc... His suggestion is to make prayer the central focus of everything else. Prayer as part of every moment of my life... so that it all becomes one big sacred journey with little altars all around. ...one big conversation with an ever-present God for whom nothing is too small, to unimportant, to secular, to worldly to be loved with divine love. And the question St Benedict encourages us to ask ourselves at the beginning and the end of every single day is: Am I daily becoming a more loving person? ...walking God's way overflowing with love in all I do? ...washing dishes, typing letters, developing systems, cooking meals, helping with homework, shopping for food, ironing shirts, mending things... Are we living our lives to the fullest, making them as a whole "the work of God"?

These questions are not meant to be answered now. And they are not to be answered with words. They can only be answered by our very lives, from dawn till dusk every single day of our life journey. And like Abraham we may get it all right at times, and fail at others. Like Abraham we may be at peace one day and struggling with promises and blessings the other. And like Abraham we are given the assurance that however hard or long the journey may be, we are not out there alone. We are walking with others and always in the light of a God who asks us to be open for the big and small changes and surprises that can set our hearts and minds towards building little altars that help us not to forget that God is with us always and wherever we go.

Let me finish the sermon...
and my thoughts for now with an affirmation of faith which is dedicated to those who are on the journey...
And when you hear it, remember Abraham and Sara and all those who came after them travelling on sacred journeys and resting in sacred spaces because God is blessing them and sending them out to be a blessing to those they meet.

We believe in God
who created us from nothing
and goes on bringing to birth
new things beyond our imagining.

We believe in Jesus Christ
who entered our unknown journey
and experienced all our living,
who walked in our earthiness
and can still be discovered
in our midst.

We believe in the Holy Spirit
who calls us on to truth
in light beyond our seeing, who stirs within our being
like a melody of possible music,
who dances on before us
in the freedom of passionate life. Amen.