It’s a delight to be here... I’d like to thank the Dean for his kind invitation to preach this morning; (an invitation that came only two days ago – we live the sort of life where seizing the moment can be important, even when the service booklet has already been printed. For those who have arrived late today, I am not the Dean. I live just a few metres away but am hardly ever here; most Sundays at this time you would find me in the chapel at the George Eliot Hospital in Nuneaton, where I work.

I love the services we do in the hospital chapel. We work quite hard beforehand to find patients who would like and are able to be there; then we navigate hospital wheelchairs to fetch them and on a good day we may have 3 or 5 patients – small numbers - and about the same number of other people. Hospitals are such levelling places, in so many ways, and what I love about Sundays is the way we form this community of brokenness, completely different every week, mixing health and ill-health, some of us wrapped in blankets and some in overcoats; in a peaceful space in the midst of such intensity we sing hymns and we break bread and we say to one another: we are the body of Christ. I looked around the other day. There was a woman with one eye sitting bolt upright in a wheelchair; a man who seemed content to be with us, but bewildered too; a woman who couldn’t stop crying, and somehow in the sharing of bread and wine there was a real glimpse of something greater and more truthful than any of us could have found words for. One of those moments when I understood what Jesus meant when he said where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there.

And my hope and my prayer is that as we all went back to our places – the three of them, back to those hospital beds and all the fears that are met there – that something of the truth, the glory of that simple sharing gave strength and sustenance to whatever lay ahead.

Faith can be difficult in hospital. Actually, faith can be difficult anywhere – it’s just that hospitals tend to be places of truth where there can be time to be honest about how we really are, body, mind and spirit. Such honesty can be hard to deal though. As TS Eliot so rightly wrote, human kind cannot bear too much reality. It can be hard to go on believing when things are not working out. Hard to go on believing when we are in pain, or when hopes are dashed. Or when we just can’t quite equate what our faith tells us and what our day to day experience shows us.

That’s why it’s quite fabulous to meet Abram in the Genesis passage wrestling with just those questions. We hear a whole conversation between him and Yahweh, God. God says, your reward shall be great.... Abram says, but what will you give me, for I am childless? Look at me, I have no heir. And Abram tries to manipulate – not in a bad way – how God’s promise might be made to be true – all that confusion about children from one of his slaves - And God says, no no no, you will have more descendants than you can imagine – and he brings him out to look at the stars and says, look at them all – so shall your descendants be. And Abram looks at the stars, and he looks at his life, and he can’t equate them, and he has to decide whether God can be trusted. He chooses to believe, and to go on believing, despite everything. And we see God honour that faith, faltering as it may be.
In some ways the whole story of Genesis, especially Abraham’s story, is all about these two questions – is God trustworthy? And second, will we trust God?

And the conversation goes on – God takes Abram further. I am the Lord, he says, and I brought you this far, took you from Ur .. to give you this land to possess. The promised land. Right in these early chapters of Genesis, is all the question of the land, and whose it is and why. Abram knows nothing of the centuries of conflict ahead, but again he looks at the land, full of other people who are quite settled there, and he looks at what he possesses, which is nowhere, and he says, but – so good to see that word but, a word of our humanity if ever there was one – but Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it? And then we get an insight into a ritual that I don’t pretend to understand; Abram obediently following the tenets of his religion, perhaps not unlike the way that we do, though with different rituals. And we see Abram fall asleep, who knows why, maybe he was simply exhausted – and a deep and terrifying darkness descends upon him.

A deep and terrifying darkness. I wonder how many of us could identify with that. I wonder what you think of when you hear those words. Kind of Lenten words, maybe. Wilderness words. The gospel last Sunday was of Jesus in the wilderness, engaging with deep and terrifying thoughts and temptations. It seems to me that one of the great leaps of faith that we are called to, invited to, is to trust that in those moments of deep and terrifying darkness, that there still is a hand to hold, that God is not absent, even when seemingly we have little to go on. In the wilderness, in the absence of comfort, Jesus turned to the places in scripture where he knew God could be found to seek the strength that he needed at that time. I wonder where you turn to get such strength?

I met a woman the other day who is dying and she doesn’t want to be. Since she discovered her diagnosis some weeks ago, she had ceased to believe. I can’t any more, she said, and she wept. She was in a truly deep and terrifying darkness. I had offered her a little woven cross, stitched by another woman whose life is limited to her bed and her chair and who painstakingly – literally painstakingly- makes these crosses, tiny tapestries. My woman clung to that little cross. I offered something else, a line given to me that sustains me in my own darknesses, written by St John of the Cross. “The love of God protects us from nothing, but it sustains us in everything.” I wrote it down for her. And so in her hand she had the little cross, the gift of the faltering faith of another sick woman whom she’d never met, and itself a reminder of the journey Jesus made through depth and fear – the journey he hints at in those words in today’s gospel – “I must be on my way…” – and some words that of course didn’t give her what she wanted, which was for a different diagnosis, but that promised all she needed for the journey she was on. When I saw her a few days later, she was still holding onto to the little cross and those words. “The love of God protects us from nothing, but it sustains us in everything.”

I don’t want to tell this as a good news story, except that there is something really important about seeing that our faith, whether you see that as a gift from God or as something grittily hard worked out, it’s about more than now – it’s about an invitation to a great big picture of which our lives, every single one of them, form an essential part. It’s hard for us to see beyond the now, so filled with things we long for – seeing beyond is itself a leap of faith. And I think God calls us to take part, to play our part in that great big picture – and doing so is so often about taking a step into the darkness, deep and terrifying as it may be, and trusting that God will be there.

And God will be there. That’s the whole story of scripture, and the truth that we work liturgically as we journey from incarnation through these days of lent, walking with Christ on his journey – which is our
journey – to death and beyond. I think we can only make that journey when we face these two things: the reality of the stuff of our lives – when we, like Abram, make that prayer “But Lord god …..” and the reality of the greatness of the faithfulness of God. Look up at the stars. Can you count them? ….. And Abram believed the Lord. And the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. There is a whole other sermon in those words – but perhaps enough for now to see the invitation to that dialogue of our lives and God’s life, our voice and God’s voice weaving together through the darkness and the light. And the promise with which our first reading began: Do not be afraid, I am your shield....”

I’d like to finish with a little poem that my own father wrote as he approached his death more than three decades ago, having faced in his own way those two truths of his life and its diagnosis, and the almost unknown truth of the faithfulness of God. I was a child, I didn’t understand his journey, but I think I do understand the place of faith and peace he got to in this little poem. You need to understand he was a sailor (in fact he once stood to preach in this very pulpit in 1966)

The wind is fair for that far shore
To which you sail alone
There is no menace in the sea
And the shrouds sing, time to go.

Who takes your lines on that far quay
I simply do not know.
But a mooring ring there’s sure to be,
And someone to lend a hand to me,
And together we’ll make a harbour stow
And then I can go below.

The love of God protects us from nothing, but sustains us in – absolutely - everything.