

Sermon 13.3.22

Genesis 15.1–12,17–18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3.17 – 4.1; Luke 13.31–35

God took Abram outside and said, ‘Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’

This beautiful promise plunges us into the midst of a great turning point not only in the Book of Genesis, not only in whole story of the Bible but in the whole history of humanity.

As Christians we tend to be most attuned to hear the story of the creation and the fall, the first sin committed by Adam and Eve, the eating of the apple, as the central moment around which the Old Testament hinges, the setting of the scene for the resurrection of Christ.

But for a moment I want to see this story through Jewish eyes. Biblical writers throughout the Old Testament would return only occasionally to the story of Adam but over and over again to the story of Abram. It was this event, they believed, that had the most to reveal about their relationship with God, how he was to work through a particular people, called to be his own.

For the first rabbis, writing, in fact, around Jesus’ own time, this was the climactic event of the Old Testament. To know God’s plan, to consider humanity’s responsibilities, to understand its failures, to find reassurance in the face of disaster, they recalled this promise.

But this story, the relationship between God and Abram and the descendants of Abram, is deeply important to Christians too.

The eating of the apple reveals the nature of human sinfulness, the need for repentance and reconciliation, the broken state of the world. But the covenant with Abram shows us the nature of divine commitment and the struggle for human faithfulness. St Paul, who is often associated with the first story, would draw deeply on the second as well.

So as we prepare for Good Friday and Easter, for the full revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ, I want to think about how that same God revealed himself two thousand years earlier under the night sky in the strange land of Canaan.

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To understand this story we need to begin a few chapters earlier, when Abram, an old, childless man and his wife are told to leave the land of his birth after a calling from God. And although he is a pagan and this God is unfamiliar to him, he trusts in this instruction and leaves. They travel and pitch their tents in Canaan, the land that has been promised to them.

The reading we heard this morning comes after he fights and wins a great battle with the king of Sodom to stay in possession.

While all this is going on, God will make three covenants, three agreements, with Abram. The one we heard this morning is the second.

The one that climaxes with the promise:

God 'brought [Abram] outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.'

Remember that this is the second agreement, the second time God has promised Abram many descendants, but he is still childless, the promise God made has still not come true. Abram and his wife are already old, the first covenant has long passed, and yet, when he is promised descendants like the stars in the night sky, he believes.

For St Paul, it was this faith against the odds that made Abram the great exemplar for belief, the template for the Christian faith in God. And this belief alone was understood both by the writer of Genesis and by St Paul to be enough for righteousness, justification, doing what is right in God's sight.

It is worth being clear about this what these words, 'faith', 'belief', mean here. The faith of Abram was not abstract or mysterious, it was quite simple: that God would do as he had promised.

And such belief is not immune to doubt or struggle. Abram will waver – even in this passage, he asks God for proof that he will bear a son and later he and Sarah will come up with their own scheme for child birth – but for both Christian and Jewish writers this will not prevent Abram being held up as our model for how we are to believe.

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But if this story is to reveal to us an exemplar for human belief, even in its faults and failures, it is also to reveal God's faith in us.

When we try to explain the word covenant we often gloss it as 'deal' or 'agreement', but, in this case, this is misleading. In the reading we just heard, there is no trade, no quid pro quo. Where we expect an exchange instead we find that the commitment is made entirely by God.

The strange ritual that follows, the halving of animals, the smoking firepot that will pass between them, these gestures show the cost of breaking the covenant. To pass between a dismembered animal was to agree to allow the other party to do the same to you, should you fail to do what you had promised. But in this case, it is not Abram who passes between the animals but the symbol of God himself. It will be God alone who promises, God alone who will act, God alone who takes on responsibility for fulfilling the rituals of covenant.

This is, in other words, an act of grace. It is a moment when God freely commits himself to his people, without compensation, without trade. Abram does not earn this covenant, he does not deserve it, he is not the most moral or perfect human. God's faithfulness to him and his descendants is pure gracefulness.

As Christians, we recognise grace as fundamental to God's nature, and as revealed fully in the birth, death and resurrection of Christ, but it is a free gifting that we find already here, in the earliest chapters of the Bible.

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These, then, have been the lessons that Jews and Christians have drawn from the story of Abraham for some 4,000 years: first, that humans are called to faithfulness, even the faithfulness to leave their homes, to settle in unknown places, to give up their false Gods, and to trust in the most implausible of promises.

And, secondly, that God will freely give of himself, without return, without balance, caring only to draw his people to himself.

But I want to end with a final reflection: that the centrality of these chapters of Genesis to the major world religions is also to do with the responsibility that God gives Abram. It is here that God will first choose a particular people to be his ambassadors in the world: but Abram's faithfulness is not merely for his own good. God will tell Abram that his descendants are blessed in order to bring blessing to others. It is the start of a bond between him and his descendants and God that is to bless the whole world.

I believe there are three messages, then, that we can take into our Lenten observance: the first is the intention to deepen our own trust in God's promise; the second is to be thankful for God's grace that will reach its climax on Good Friday and Easter; and the third is to ensure that our many blessings become a blessing to others.

Amen.