

The Faith of Abraham

Genesis 15.1-6

Psalm 33.12-22*

Hebrews 11.1-3,8-16

Luke 12.32-40

The story of Abraham is generally regarded as the earliest piece of history in the Old Testament. Old Testament scholars reckon it dates from around 1800 BC. This was the time when human beings had moved beyond using stones as tools and were melting copper to make bronze; the ability to make and work iron had yet to be acquired. That is to say, it was during the Bronze Age, but before the Iron Age. In Britain men and women were farming the chalk lands of Wiltshire and Dorset, burying their dead in huge barrows and constructing the final version of Stonehenge. The greatest nations, however, were in the Middle and Far East where Babylon in southern Iraq overtook Thebes in Egypt as the greatest city on earth. And it was in this area of Babylon that Abraham lived, the most advanced civilization of its time.

Abraham is of enormous significance for us. First because the three great religions of our time all trace their roots back to Abraham. The first to do so were the Jews. They believe they are physically descended from Abraham, his son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob. The latter changed his name to Israel and had twelve sons – the twelve tribes of Israel. That is the significance of today's reading in which we heard of Abraham's vision of God. Abraham had no legitimate sons at this time and he feared that all he possessed would be inherited by a distant relative, Eliezer of Damascus. But we hear how God promised that Abraham would have as many descendants as there are stars in the sky. And he does. The stars in the sky are the Jewish people.

In fact Abraham goes on to have two sons. Isaac is born to his wife Sarah. The first son, Ishmael, is born to his slave girl, to Hagar (Genesis 16)(their social conventions were very different from ours!) The second son Isaac, is born to his wife, Sarah, (Genesis 21). Sarah,

however, becomes jealous of Ishmael and asks Abraham to drive him and his mother away. Abraham is reluctant but God appears to him and makes a promise:

“Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.”

Genesis 21:12-13

So we hear that Ishmael grows up in the desert with his mother Hagar, he becomes an archer and his mother finds him a wife from Egypt. Despite being sent away, Ishmael is still around with Isaac to bury their father (Genesis 25:9) and the author of Genesis names his twelve sons (Genesis 25:12). It is, however, to Isaac that Abraham leaves all his possessions.

From the Christian and Jewish perspective that is pretty much all we hear of Ishmael. But the Moslem tradition is that just as Abraham through Isaac is the father of all Jewish people, so Abraham through Ishmael is the father of all the Arab people – and therefore of the Moslems. So, not only do Jews and Moslems have a common homeland – Israel or Palestine, and a common holy city, Jerusalem but also a common ancestor, Abraham.

Christians also trace their roots back to Abraham but in a spiritual rather than a physical sense. What unites us to Abraham is not blood or DNA but faith. We trust in God. This is shown very clearly in the reading we heard today. To put it in very simple terms, God makes a promise to Abraham; and Abraham believes it. Abraham trusts God; he puts his faith in God. This is demonstrated in that utterly scary story where Abraham nearly sacrifices his Isaac. He believes that God has called him to sacrifice his one legitimate son and is on the point of doing so when God intervenes and provides a lamb for sacrifice. In order not to be appalled by this story we need to remember that at the time animal and even human sacrifices were common – and indeed

continued for many more centuries on the other side of the Atlantic. But the point of the story is that Abraham trusts God completely – and his trust is shown to be well founded.

So what does faith mean to us today?

Let me give you a secular example. Every day I put my faith in my car. Not only do I drive it but some days I drive for many miles at considerable speed along various motorways. I know that if anything goes wrong I could die. But I trust in the car's steering, in the brakes and in the steering and brakes of all the cars around me; and in the road sense of all the other drivers that they will obey all the signals and rules of the road. It is an immense act of faith and I make it every day of my life.

But what does faith in God look like? Jesus makes two suggestions in today's gospel. First he tells us to sell our possessions and build up treasure in heaven. That is hard. It is hard because we are all wealthy. I don't mean wealthy like Sir Philip Green who seems to have millions at his disposal. But compared with the vast majority of human beings in Africa and Asia we have vast wealth. Not only do most of us now where tomorrow's dinner is coming from but we have a pretty good idea for next year or the year after that. And that can be very corrupting because we think that is what matters. Jesus was very clear about this corrupting effect:

It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 19:24

Perhaps each one of us needs to ask the question whether God is calling me to take a step of faith in how I use my wealth and how I trust in it.

The other thing that Jesus tells us is that we should be ready for his return – as ready as if we were prepared for a burglar! These words

can sound quite intimidating. But I do not think they are meant to be. Serious without doubt. Weighty. But not intimidating. Let me put it like this. Imagine the person in the world whom you most respect. The most upright, decent person you know. And now imagine that everything in your life is laid bare to that person: the way you speak, the way you spend your time, the way you use your money, the way you treat other people. How might you feel? I think what Jesus is saying is that if you feel shame, embarrassment, regret, then all is not well. Faith is living my life in the conviction that pleasing God is all that matters and, in comparison, the opinion of others, my own comfort, my own wealth are all as nothing. It is in that sense that we should be ready for the coming of the son of man at an unexpected hour.

But the reality is that Christ has come. We are in his presence every moment of the day. What changes is not the presence of Christ but his awareness of it. Our calling us Christians is not to find God but to recognise him in our daily lives.

N Clews
11th August 2019