

ADDRESS FOR SUNDAY 5TH AUGUST 2018

TENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

ABRAHAM – PATRIARCH, PARADOX AND FRIEND OF GOD

This morning we have the second sermon in our summer series about Old Testament heroes. Last week we had the story of the three Jewish exiles, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who braved the flames of the fiery furnace rather than bow down to King Nebuchadnezzar's golden image. This week our hero is Abraham, revered by Jewish people to this day as the Patriarch, the father and founder of their nation. But why should he be important for us? What can someone who lived so long ago, in a culture very different from ours, possibly have to say to 21st Century Christians?

First, let's consider what we know about Abraham. Children's bibles picture him with a flowing beard and a benevolent eye, surrounded by his tents and flocks, and gazing towards the promised land of Canaan. And our knowledge of the man possibly doesn't go much beyond the story we heard about in childhood. He lived in Ur of the Chaldees, until the family moved to Haran in Mesopotamia. While he was there, God called him to leave that place for another land which would be shown him, and at the same time promised him that that same land would be given to his descendants and that those descendants would become a great nation even though, at that point he and his wife Sarah had no children and were well on in years.

Perhaps the best-known part of Abraham's story is the miraculous birth of his son, Isaac; and who can fail to appreciate the drama of that moment on the mountainside when Abraham prepared to sacrifice that beloved only son to God – or the tremendous climax when God stayed his hand and provided a ram for offering instead. So – Abraham was faithful and obedient. But is that all there is? Or are there other important things we can learn from the life of this man besides a promised land, a promised child and a promised nation? Let's put the **Patriarchal** picture on one side and take a closer look at the man.

If and when you get down to reading, really reading, the story of Abraham, you find that it's nothing like as straightforward as first appears. Conclusions arrived at at one stage, are completely shattered by events recorded at the next. Far from being merely a simple, faithful soul, Abraham is revealed as a complex mixture of good and bad, of faith and doubt – in other words, a **paradox**, which, if we're honest, describes most of us. So, let's take a closer look at *both* sides of the coin. Because as well as the shining side, there is a tarnished side with which we are perhaps not so familiar.

Let's begin with the shining side – starting with the first seven words of Genesis Chapter 12 which, in the words of a well-known Scottish preacher of my youth, are “verra revealing”. “**Now the Lord said to Abram...**” These are words which suggest that from the first Abraham was in touch with God. There was no blinding revelation, no burning bush - God simply spoke and Abraham heard him, because they were in touch with each other. Indeed, we continually read in Genesis that Abraham “called on the name of the Lord”. A point to

think about – the importance of keeping in touch with God. Because, if we don't, how can we ever know what he wants us to do?

What God wanted Abraham to do was quite something! **“Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to a land that I will show you”**. Of course, we must get this in its correct perspective. Abraham was a nomad, and therefore accustomed to folding his tent and moving on when he felt like it. But not out of his country, or away from his people. Nomad thought he was, there were territorial boundaries beyond which, in the ordinary way, he would never have considered going. And there was no reason for moving – no famine, no illness, no war. Yet in obedience to God's command, he went, having no idea where he was going! Which brings home with staggering clarity the full extent of his faith!

One of the facts that really appeals to me about Abraham's story is that an important new phase of his life only began when he was quite an elderly man! He could have said he was too old or too tired or too settled to start again, but he didn't. An example which, as a Senior Citizen, I find particularly inspiring and encouraging!

And there were other attributes besides faith and obedience. **Generosity**, for example. When Abraham set out for the unknown destination, he took his nephew Lot and family with him. But when they got to Canaan it became apparent that there wasn't enough grazing land for both families to live together. They had to separate, and although Abraham was the elder he did the generous thing and gave Lot the choice, either to stay on the high land of Canaan or to go down to the well-watered plain of Jordan. Lot chose to go down to easy living on the plain, - and lived to regret the choice when the cities of Sodom and Gamorrah were destroyed for their wickedness, probably by a volcanic eruption, and his wife was turned into a pillar of salt!

And then there's **courtesy**. There was that occasion on the plain of Mamre when Abraham entertained three strangers who appeared outside his tent? They were actually heavenly visitors come to reaffirm God's promise of a son for him and Sarah, but as far as he was concerned they were ordinary men - and what pains he took to make them welcome, providing water to wash their feet, giving them a comfortable rest place in the shade, preparing food for them, and all in the heat of the day, when he probably didn't feel like stirring himself – but he was thoughtful for others and that surely is the essence of courtesy. And the story also underlines the importance of being **hospitable**. My father often quoted the verse from Hebrews **“Be not forgetful to entertain strangers for in so doing some have entertained angels unawares”**. I don't know how many angels my parents entertained over the years – but our house was always full of people!

So much on the credit side! Faith, obedience, generosity, courtesy, hospitality...the list is quite depressing in its perfection! But the other side of the coin is vastly different. Abraham whose faith has been held up through the ages as an example to lesser spirits was also guilty of the most amazing lack of it on at least two occasions, one of which we heard about in our first reading.

Soon after they arrived in Canaan for the first time, there was a great famine so Abraham took the family down to Egypt. His wife Sarah, although getting on in years, was still very beautiful, and he knew that men would envy him because of her and inevitably someone would try to put him quietly out of the way. So he told Sarah to say that she was his sister. In fact, she *was* his half- sister, but it was all basically dishonest, motivated by a strong desire for self-preservation, and degrading for Sarah especially when the fame of her beauty reached the ears of the Pharaoh and she was taken into the royal palace, because of which Abraham reaped great material advantage. Then a series of plagues fell upon Pharaoh's household, and he, guessing that they were somehow connected with Sarah, sent for Abraham, wormed the whole story out of him, denounced him and banished the family from Egypt. Not much faith evident in any of that. But Abraham did redeem himself. After the banishment, he went back to Bethel, to the place where he had first pitched his tent when he got to Canaan, and he "called on the name of the Lord". In other words, he said sorry and asked for God's forgiveness – as indeed we sometimes have to do, when our actions have been contrary to what God would expect of us.

The other example of Abraham's lack of faith is over the question of the promised child. Five times God told him that Sarah would bear him a son and his descendants would become a great nation, and still he doubted – to the extent that, at Sarah's suggestion, he took her maid Hagar for his second wife, and Hagar bore him a son named Ishmael. But then, when Sarah did finally give birth to Isaac all sorts of domestic difficulties arose, and home life became very uncomfortable. Sarah became jealous of Ishmael and told Abraham to send Hagar and her son away, and he did so, leaving them both to wander in the desert, and doubtless wishing that he hadn't got himself into such a distressing situation. But God spoke to Hagar in *her* distress and told her that Ishmael was also to be the founder of a nation – which to this day also calls Abraham "Father" and through the Muslim faith worships one God – Allah.

So there we have Abraham – a complex mixture of a man, remembered not only as the Patriarch, nor as the Paradox, but importantly, as James tells us in the second chapter of his Letter, as **"The Friend of God"**. Dr Johnson once wrote: **"Friendship is no plant of hasty growth, tho' planted in esteems's deep fixed soil. The gradual culture of kind intercourse must bring it to perfection"**.

And that was certainly true of God and Abraham. Think of the **mutual trust** of friendship. Despite all Abraham's failures, he still trusted God and God continued to trust him as the Founder of his Chosen People. Think of the **forgiveness** of friendship. Abraham tried God's patience many times, but he was always sorry for his sins and God was always ready to forgive him. Most importantly, friendship means **a willingness to give** – and here we reach the heart of Abraham's story. When God asked him to sacrifice his dearly loved only son, the one in whom God's promises were going to be fulfilled, he was prepared to do it. In spite of the anguish, the unspoken "Why?" he was ready and willing to give God everything he had. In the end, of course, he didn't have to, but the demands of friendship were tried to the limit that day, and Abraham passed the supreme test with flying colours. Yes, he was God's friend

– and God’s beloved only Son, who was *not* spared in making the supreme sacrifice once said to his disciples “You are my friends **if you do whatever I command you**”.

So what message does all this have for us? I think simply this, that Abraham was an ordinary human being, like us a combination of good and bad, faith and doubt and yet God used his life to very significant purpose and was pleased to call him friend. From him we can learn the supreme importance of faith in God and obedience to his will. Abraham never knew the full extent of God’s plan for his people and yet without him it could never have been accomplished. So, although there are times when we can’t understand God’s purpose for us, we should never doubt that he has one – that there is some function which we alone are called to fulfil. We’re all as important as Abraham was in God’s scheme of things – so like Abraham, we should keep in touch with him, listen for his call, respond in faith and obedience and say sorry when we let him down, knowing that he will forgive us. There’s a verse from the Psalms which says it all and I leave it with you now.

“Trust in the Lord with all thine heart and lean not unto thine own understanding; in all thy ways acknowledge him and he will direct thy paths.”