

Faithfulness ...

... Trusting God's Promises

A sermon given on the Second Sunday of Lent - 16th March 2025, by the Mission Priest, the Revd Eileen Wallis, in Beverley Minster

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Luke 13:31-end

I want to talk to you today about faithfulness. Are you a faithful person? Is God faithful? What is faithfulness? The 'Font of All Knowledge' Wikipedia says that faithfulness means being 'unfailingly loyal to someone or something, and putting that loyalty into consistent practice regardless of extenuating circumstances.' Now, when we see it like this perhaps we have to admit, Well no, we're not always faithful to people and to God - but, is God faithful to us? I want to look at Abraham and then we'll look at Jesus. But first of all a question for you - if you came face to face with God right now and you could ask him one question about your life, what would it be? As you look back over your life, I wonder what that question would be, because we all have a story, a very unique story - it's where we were born, our family, our schooling, our education, our workplace - we know our relationship with God feeds into that story, where we are now and where we hope to be in the future.

Abraham had a story too, and he had a question which he asked God, which we heard in our first reading. So let me think a little bit more about this character, Abraham. Now, don't put your hands up, but how many of you have lived more than seven decades? Because Abraham was 75 years old and he lived in 'Ur of the Chaldeans', which was essentially the heartbeat of Babylon, a place not known for its worship of the living God. And at 75 years he was without children because his wife was barren. (Why does it always have to be the wife's fault?) And he must have been settled into at least semi-retirement, but perhaps disappointed with his life as he looked back - when out of nowhere, an unknown God, a God who wasn't known to him, spoke to him and told him to leave his home and his people and start to walk with this God into a new and unknown frontier.

Now, why did he do it? And would you have done it if at the age of 75, God told you to put everything down and to follow him. All I can think of was that it was something about the voice, the voice of God that he heard, which was so compelling and so intriguing that Abraham could not resist it. And this voice carried a promise that Abraham would be made into a great nation and that the whole world would be blessed through his offspring. And so at 75 he set off with his barren wife Sarai and Lot, his nephew. And just before our reading today, he's had many battles with people, and he's had lots of adventures, and he's been on the road a while. God has given him victory over his enemies. God has appeared to him after one enemy where he rescued his nephew Lot who had been captured and said, 'Do not be afraid. I am your shield. Your reward will be great. ' But it was at this point that Abraham looked around and he saw his wife Sarah, now into her eighties! He has been obedient to the call of God in his life: he has been led and provided for; he has seen many great things; he knows God in an intimate way - but, where was the child that God had promised him, that through that child and his descendants, Abraham would be a blessing? (Genesis 12:2)

And Abraham doubted how God was going to make it happen. But such was the relationship and the intimacy that Abraham had with the Lord that he didn't just think, Oh, well, I've got to accept my lot, or he didn't just moan to Sarah in private. He came right out and asked God, 'How is this going to happen?' He challenges God with this question about his life. And what does God do? He doesn't strike him down for doubting. He takes him outside. He says, Look at the stars and count them, and believe that as you count them, that I can do whatever I want to. I am powerful enough, and when the time is right, I will act.' Something about Abraham shows he wasn't yet ready to hold the fullness of the promise that he'd been given, and there were still many things in his life, attitudes, desire for control, ego, whatever it was, which had to die before he was ready to hold the promise. But the time will come, God's saying - the time will come if you trust me and you continue to be obedient to me.

And that time did come, but Abraham had to wait until he was 100 when they became parents to Isaac. And in that time, Abraham had tried to manipulate this child through his wife's servant, Hagar. So he hadn't been exactly faithful to God. But that's another story. But for now, let us say this, that even though Abraham questioned God and doubted Him, the Bible says this, that Abraham believed the Lord and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. Now, his doubting and questioning didn't harm his relationship with God. In fact, I think it would have strengthened it.

So what can we learn from the life of Abraham today? Is it that we don't have to stand on ceremony with the God who loves us? Is it that we don't have to passively accept his will? Is it that he wants us to question and challenge and ask him and to rail against him sometimes? And that in that, He can show us ultimately who He is. But Abraham challenged God because ultimately he believed that God was with him, and he had faith in that voice that he had been hearing since the age of 75, faith enough to challenge God.

And so I come back to the question, what is your question over your life? And perhaps God wants you to bring that question to him.

In our gospel reading, we hear about Jesus. He is on his way to Jerusalem. He knows that in Jerusalem he will be crucified. Jesus was faithful to the mission and the task that he was given. He was faithful to God. He was faithful to us. Even though the Pharisees were coming and saying, 'Herod is after you, run away, ' he didn't run away. He set his face towards Jerusalem, the place that killed the prophets. He knew that he was going to be tortured and victimised and ultimately die, but his faithfulness to us was the thing that drew him on.

And so this is what we shall remember: that Abraham knew God personally, and God was faithful to Abraham; people around Jesus knew him personally, and he was faithful to them. And to us today, he's faithful to us: his Spirit is poured out that whoever wants that intimate relationship with God, through Jesus, can have that. And in the passage Jesus says, like a mother hen I long to protect you - for you to be like chicks to come and hide under my feathers to protect you from the fox. There are foxes all around, even within the church. But Jesus is saying, let me protect you. Come to me as your security and your safety. I will protect you. And just as the mother hen is prepared to put down her life and sacrifice herself to protect the chicks when the fox is there, so Jesus did that and sacrificed himself for us.

So today, what might the invitation of the Holy Spirit be to us after hearing his word? Is it that God is encouraging you to be honest, to bring your doubts, your questions, to have faith enough to question? Or might it be to trust this God, who longs to protect and love and nurture, with

your life? Or is it as you look back over your life there is something that is a disappointment to you, just like Abraham and God is just reminding you that in the right time, He will act. Maybe it's time to start to believe that the God who created the stars is able.

So let us pray: Holy spirit, open our ears to hear and respond to your beautiful and irresistible voice today.

Reading Text

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 Luke 6:17-26

¹ After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.' ² But Abram said, 'O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?' ³ And Abram said, 'You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.' ⁴ But the word of the Lord came to him, 'This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.' ⁵ He brought him 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.' ⁶ And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. ⁷ Then he said to him, 'I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.' ⁸ But he said, 'O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?' ⁹ He said to him, 'Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon.' ¹⁰ He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. ¹¹ And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. ¹² As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

¹⁷ When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.'

Luke 13:31-end

³¹ At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.' ³² He said to them, 'Go and tell that fox for me, "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work." ³³ Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem.' ³⁴ Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁵ See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." '