

## Abraham the friend of God

Genesis 12:1-3 & 15:1-6

Hebrews 11:8-12

Mark 1:16-20

A couple of years ago we were fortunate enough to be able to visit Kate's son Ally who was then working in Ethiopia. While we were there we headed away from the city for the weekend and were staying the night in a motel miles from any town or village in the Simien mountains. The night was dark but clear and, as the sun set, slowly stars began to appear in the night sky. More stars than I have ever seen before. The more I looked the more I saw. Counting them would have been an impossible exercise. Everywhere there seemed to be more stars than could be numbered.

It must have been something like that for Abram as God said to him: *'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be.'*

But first a short recap.

As we said last week, we are beginning a series of sermons which will take us through to Advent and give us a glimpse into the stories of God relating to his people over the ages as we take a speedy trip through the major stories of the Bible.

Last week we thought about creation – how God declared the world – his creation – to be very good and how we have a responsibility to care for it. We thought too of humans being made in God's image, how that image has been tarnished but how it is shown in perfection in Jesus.

Today we pick up the Bible story a little later in that first book of the Bible (genesis) with the story of Abram (soon to be renamed Abraham) setting out in response to the call of God.

We haven't got the time to look at all of the Bible in this short series, so we have skipped over the stories of Adam and Eve, of Cain and Abel, of the world that was created so perfectly going awry. We have passed by the stories of Noah and the flood, the rainbow as a sign of hope then and still today, and of the Tower of Babel and have reached the point where myth and poetry gives

way to some form of early history – just over 2000 years before the birth of Jesus. The story of Abram.

We said a few moments ago it is the story of Abram setting out in response to the call of God.

The Bible often talks of God calling people. Here we have Abram being called to leave his homeland and set out – seemingly into the unknown. Elsewhere we might think of the great prophets – Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah and others being called by God to proclaim his message to the people. In the New Testament – as in today’s gospel reading – we hear of Jesus calling Simon and Andrew and James and John to follow him. And for all of these the pattern is God calling them to leave what they are doing and do something or go somewhere for him. Its not always clear what the destination will be, and to obey the call takes an enormous act of trust and faith.

For one or two of us we may have experienced something like that in our own lives. A feeling, an impulse to do something new and different. We may not have been sure that it was God, but we were sure that it was real. And we felt we had no option but to respond.

But for most of us I guess such a dramatic call is something alien. Our lives have just progressed with us making the best decisions we could make at the time as things progressed. For most of us life continues in an unremarkable pattern. It may be that someone asks us to do something and we agree. To help at the Welcome café; to join the Jimmy Tots team; to be on the PCC; to spend Wednesday mornings with the team caring for the churchyard. But I guess that we wouldn’t necessarily see that as being called.

So for us in our ordinary lives, what can we learn from this story of Abram’s call and his obedient and faithful response?

I have always loved the story of Abraham (lets use his more familiar name). Incidentally the name change was important. His new name meant Father of a multitude. Every time someone used his name (just as every time he looked up to the night sky and saw the stars) he would have been reminded of God’s promise to him; God’s call. How good was that?

But I love this story for many reasons.

First the unlikeliness of it all. Abraham was getting on a bit – the Bible says he was 75 years old when he heard this call from God. But its not just his age. The passage in the Bible just prior to the one we had read this morning says that Sarah – Abraham’s wife – was barren – she could have no children. So what was going on – God calling a childless and elderly couple to pack their bags and set off on a journey into the unknown spurred on by the unlikely promise that they would have a large family.

Sometimes we are asked to do things that we don’t feel we are up to. It may be me that has asked you, or one of the wardens or someone else. It may be nothing to do with church, but something else you are involved with. But you have been asked because someone thinks you have the potential to do something. Too often we underestimate our own abilities – and it takes someone else to see what we are capable of. Perhaps we should have faith in their judgement and say “yes”.

Another reason why I love the story of Abraham is because he is in many ways just like us. He gets things wrong – there is an incident where he lies to the king of Egypt and says that Sarah is his sister as he thinks this will make life easier for himself. In the end it just makes things more complex.

He gets impatient and tries to solve everything himself. 10 years or so after his ‘calling’ he still has no son, so how can that promise of descendants beyond number come true? So he takes matters into his own hands and has a child with his wife’s slave girl. And again he causes more problems by doing so. Problems with his relationship with Sarah, and problems for Hagar the slave girl. Will he never learn?

How many times have we done that? Tried to solve things ourselves when they are not in our remit to solve. Interfering, thinking that we know best, unwilling to trust others to do things, or unable to trust in God even though we know his promises.

But the chief reason why I love the story is that despite all of this God is faithful to him and blesses him. Not just with the descendants without number – though that does come true – but also by referring to Abraham as his friend. Abraham the friend of God. And we read about the conversations between Abraham and God – conversations that do indeed sound like two friends talking.

In today's reading we read that *Abraham believed the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness*. A phrase that sounds strange to us, but means something like – Abraham believed and so was in a right relationship with God – in other words *he believed and was God's friend*.

We too can have that kind of relationship with God. If we put our trust in him – even though we are not perfect, even though we mess things up, even though we think we can solve the whole world's problems ourselves – we can have a similar close relationship or friendship with God. How amazing is that?

The story of Abraham marks a transition in the Bible – a transition between God dealing with the whole world to God having a particular concern initially for one individual and his family, and then for the nation which springs from his descendants. The rest of the Old Testament is about God's relationship with Israel - the descendants of Abraham. And the important thing to bear in mind as we read through that story is that Israel - the chosen people - were not chosen because they were special – that becomes quite plain as we read of them continually getting things wrong and messing things up. The important thing is that they were chosen to show to the rest of the world how much God cared for them.

Next week we will move on a couple of generations. We will move beyond Abraham's eventual heir Isaac, move beyond his marriage to Rebekah, beyond the scheming and deceit that led to the younger child Jacob receiving the blessing and the inheritance rather than Esau. And on to another dysfunctional family – the family of Jacob. And we will see how God continues to work through the mess and mire created in this world by his people.

But, just to finish this week, let us remember Abraham as the friend of God; let us recall his obedience to God's call and his trust in God. And let us try to follow the various 'calls' on our own lives, however small or insignificant they may seem to us.

And one last thought – in that night sky above the Simien mountains what really stood out bright and clear was the Southern Cross. Just as the stars in the sky reminded Abraham of God's promise to him, so the Cross in the sky reminds us of his love for us. The love that allows us to have that same close and intimate relationship with God that Abraham enjoyed.