

Sunday 11th August

Genesis 15:1-6

Hebrews 11:1-16

Luke 12:32-40

Last year – as many of you know – we went to Ethiopia to visit Kate’s son Ally and his wife Sophie. While we were there one of our excursions took us to the Semien mountains – far away from any cities or large towns – where we spent a night. The night was clear. And as we looked up to the skies we had that amazing experience where the longer you look, the more stars seem to appear. Bright ones first, then as your eye acclimatises to the light more and more stars begin to appear, till at last it seems that there is no dark sky, just millions upon millions of stars. The incredible size and depth of creation becomes plain for all to see.

And I was reminded of that night as I read the passage from Genesis today when God asks Abraham to look at the stars in the sky and try to count them. Your descendants – he says - will be like these. Countless. The more you look into my promise – says God – the more you will see.

The story of Abraham is one of my favourite stories in the bible. Abraham is described as a friend of God; The apostle Paul uses him as an example of faith and his whole argument in Romans of how we are justified solely by faith is based upon words from this passage – Abraham believed and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. And yet he was also a man of doubt, a man who feared that the promise of God would never be fulfilled, a man who went his own way and tried to solve problems that only God could solve. Someone who is in all probability like each one of us. A mixture of faith and fear; of conviction and concern.

Abraham (or Abram as he was then) was called to leave his father’s house and homelands and to follow God into the land of Canaan. Called to leave the familiar and step forward in faith. God would make a great nation of him – he promised – but the first we had heard of Abraham stated quite clearly that his wife Sarah (Sarai) was barren. They could have no children. A promise made by God that in human terms seemed impossible.

Abraham believed this mighty promise in his heart, but all too often his actions demonstrated doubt and fear.

We see him in Egypt, telling the rulers there that Sarah is his sister – trying to make life easier for himself, but showing a lack of faith in God the protector and at the same time getting himself into all kinds of trouble.

And then we see God restating the promise in the incident we read about today.

Abraham standing face to face with God; God telling him not to fear – and perhaps we can imagine him fearful that the promise of the descendants still hasn’t been fulfilled; that he and Sarah are still childless.

But God reminding Abraham that he will protect him; and reminding him of the “great reward” – the gift of the promise of many descendants.

Abraham protests – We are still childless; a slave will be my heir; I can never be the great nation you promise. Essentially saying to God – you must have got this all wrong.

We can imagine his position. Imagine what it’s like when promises seem to be unfulfilled; when it feels like God has let us down. A lament like the laments in the Psalms – where are you O God? Why don’t you do something?

You may have seen the film Shakespeare in Love. There is a scene in which Philip Henslowe – a theatre promoter – and Hugh Fennyman – the money behind a production - are in conversation. The theatres had been closed down. There seemed no hope for the production Fennyman was financing and Henslowe promoting.

Philip Henslowe:

Mr. Fennyman, allow me to explain about the theatre business. The natural condition is one of insurmountable obstacles on the road to imminent disaster.

Hugh Fennyman:

So what do we do?

Philip Henslowe:

Nothing. Strangely enough, it all turns out well.

Hugh Fennyman:

How?

Philip Henslowe:

I don't know. It's a mystery.

The situation with Abraham and his promised descendants is different - it is not wishful thinking; its not a mystery, but it is about trusting in a loving and faithful God who will bring his promise into being.

And yet, despite God restating the promise and showing him the stars as a sign, just the next chapter in our Bibles sees Abraham taking the situation into his own hands. Sarah is still not pregnant; and Abraham decides that the only way the promise can work is if he has a child with the slave Hagar. Ishmael is born – but he was clearly not the future God had intended. How often things go wrong when we start playing at being God. When we start thinking we know better than God.

God then appeared to Abraham again and once more the promise is restated. Gods patience is shown! You will be the ancestor of a multitude – and God even changed his name to Abraham from Abram – meaning ancestor of a multitude; father of a nation. And the sign of the covenant was given – the intimate sign Abraham could not avoid –

circumcision. A constant reminder of the promise as God stated again that the fulfilment would be through Sarah – that Ishmael the son of the slave was not the answer.

And then in the next chapter God appears once more – this time to say that the very next year Sarah would have a baby, the long promised son – and we have the all too real story of Sarah listening to the conversation and laughing at the idea of her in her nineties producing a child.

The conversation continues and we see something of the depth and intimacy of Abraham's relationship with God. God has said he would destroy the town of Sodom because of the evil that was done there. Abraham knows that his nephew Lot lives in Sodom and beings to bargain. What if there were 50 righteous people, 40 , 30, 20 even 10 – would you still destroy it and God saying he would spare the place for 10. A lesson for us in prayer and closeness with God.

So the story of Abraham shows his highs and lows. His intimate relationship, his face to face conversations, his arguments with God, his trust in God, and his doubts about God. It shows his mistakes and his moments of supreme trust and belief; it shows his acceptance of God and his independent streak. It shows a person much like each one of us.

But then of course the child Isaac was born. The long hoped for and longed for heir. The one through whom the nation would grow and become great.

All will be well from here on, we think. But actually what comes next is perhaps the strangest of all the incidents in the story of Abraham. Abraham is asked by God to sacrifice Isaac. To put to death the one who would give life.

It is the ultimate test of trust. Would Abraham decide that he can trust that somehow God will provide and fulfil the promises through this, or will he rely on himself, and ignore the call of God.

I have wrestled with this story over the years and can only wonder if the point of the story is to do with possessiveness. Was Abraham wanting to hang on to his son, to possess him, to not let God take him and work through him. Was Abraham putting Isaac in the place where God should be?

If so then the whole tale was God making sure that in the end, when push came to shove, Abraham would place his trust in God.

Which brings us to the message of Jesus in the gospel. *Where your treasure is there your heart will be also*

We thought about this a bit last week, but it's worth considering further especially with the example of the life of Abraham in mind.

When things are hard – or even when they are not – in whom do we trust. Do we rely on ourselves to sort things out, or do we trust in God.

And as we look back over Abraham's life we see that the times where he got things wrong were the times when God took second place.

Second place to his concern about security and safety

Second place to his concern about the future

Second place to his concern about his family – his wife and his nephew Lot

Second place to his concern about the long expected and hoped for child

But Abraham is known as the friend of God. Despite his weaknesses, despite his mistakes, despite his lack of trust he is still held up as an example of faith, and example of a most intimate and honest relationship with God. Despite his failings – or perhaps because of them.

For me he is the kind of person I can relate to. Someone who longs to trust in God, who longs to be the faithful friend and servant, but who somehow all too often gets things wrong and makes a mess.

Our reading from the letter to the Hebrews holds Abraham up as a great example of faith. If we read the whole of chapter 11 we would hear of many other biblical heroes of faith. But the passage ends in the early verses of the chapter 12 by saying we should look primarily to Jesus. The perfect example of living and the reason for our faith. Our heart should be with him, and then our lives and actions will follow.

Jesus is to be our example, our rock, our beginning and end, our reason for being, our treasure – and where our treasure is there shall our heart be.