

Sermon: Sunday 1st March 2015

Readings: Genesis 17.1-7, 15-16, Romans 4.13-25

Sermon

The story of Abraham is one of the founding legends of Judaism. It is the story of a travelling nomad who encounters God, enters into a covenant, an agreement, and eventually a nation is born.

Abraham is the Father of Israel, and his wife Sarah the Mother. Their place in Jewish tradition remains today, just as it did when Paul used them as illustrations as part of his argument within the letter he sent to the church in Rome.

Abraham and Sarah's story is not at all straightforward or clear cut. Abram, as he was named by his parents, was called by God to leave his home and settle in Canaan when he was 75.

They travelled there but the region was suffering a famine so they carried on to Egypt. On arrival Abraham tried to pass off his wife Sarah as his sister, because she was beautiful and he was worried they'd kill him so they could marry her. Pharaoh did take a fancy to Sarah but soon his whole household fell ill, which he took as divine punishment. On discovering that Sarah was married, Pharaoh deported Abraham's whole family. When Pharaoh had thought he'd gained a new wife he'd rewarded Abraham, his supposed brother-in-law, with livestock which soon became too large to keep together so the family divided with Abraham's nephew Lot settling elsewhere.

Lot was taken captive by an Elamite army and was rescued by Abraham, who in doing so happens to kill the Elamite King. When Abraham returns home with all the spoils and captives taken by the Elamites, the King of Sodom and the priest-king Melchizedek of Salem come out to greet him, and they blessed and broke bread and drank wine together.

Throughout this time Abraham received repeated promises from God that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. And for all this time he and Sarah remained childless. So they decided to give God a helping hand and Abraham had a child with Hagar, one of their servants. That child was Ishmael, from whom the Islamic faith draws their heritage, which is why Judaism, Islam and Christianity are called the Abrahamic faiths, as we all have our roots in Abraham.

When Ishmael was just entering his teens, and all the troubles that entails, and Abraham was preparing to be one hundred at his next birthday, we have the passage we heard earlier. In addition to God's earlier repeated promises their names are now changed. Abram becomes Abraham, meaning as Paul tells us "the father of many nations", but also Sarai becomes Sarah. With an h on the end rather than an i. Which could be a simple updating to a more current spelling, but it's possible the change is from meaning 'mockery' to 'princess'. Reflecting the lifting of the 'mockery' of being childless to being a 'princess', the queen of a dynasty.

The verses following our reading for today relate the unfortunate response from Abraham to God telling him he will have a child with Sarah. Abraham falls on his face laughing. Later Sarah laughs to herself when she overhears three visitors saying the same thing.

Eventually Isaac is born, and after a near miss on a mountain-top, the child grows to be the husband of Rebecca, and the father of Esau and Jacob. Later Jacob has his name changed to Israel, and through his four wives their dozen children are born who will give their names to the twelve tribes of Israel.

Abraham is not perfect. He laughs at God, tries to manipulate and interfere with God's plans, has killed in war, and was prepared to kill his own son, on at least two occasions he pretends his wife is his sister, has a nephew with poor taste in neighbours, but despite this and more the covenant still stands.

Using the same Bible verses we have today, that tells the same haphazard story, Paul is able to confidently declare, and without being contradicted by his Jewish audience, that Abraham was righteous before God. Righteous, being in right relationship with God.

This is all part of Paul's argument at the time with Jewish Christians who believed you had to be a good Jew to follow the way of Jesus. And to be a good Jew required fulfilling all of the requirements of the Jewish Law. The Jewish Law that arose from the Moses tradition which came centuries after Abraham. Paul is arguing that as Abraham was righteous before the Law, non-Jewish followers of Jesus could be without it.

Despite all of his doubts and failures, Abraham still had faith. Faith is a word with at least two meanings, either belief or trust. I lean more towards it meaning trust. Having faith in God as trusting in God, trusting in a purpose and meaning beyond myself. Trusting that even though I don't understand everything about life and faith, even though I have doubts along the way, God is still there.

When I read the 'God Delusion' by Richard Dawkins I was quite happy to be atheistic about the God he described. I don't believe in that God either. Dawkins misses the point that the majority of people of faith trust in a God beyond what they can describe or imagine. The idea of a god that sits apart from the universe making arbitrary decisions is a god in our own image. It is a god that expresses the worst elements of our humanity.

At times we all struggle to find sense and meaning in our lives and in our world, but I trust in God, trust in an ultimate reality within and beyond the universe, that urges us towards the good. It is that sense of God that I hold onto, and it is the lens through which I view my faith and the Bible.

The Bible is an ancient text that has been held sacred, been held as scripture, by communities of faith for millennia. It was written by individuals spread across the Middle East over about a thousand years, and during that time it was edited and compiled by other individuals and communities. Fellow human-beings were inspired to

put down those words, and others found them of worth, felt them to be of God, so we have kept them and treasured them down the ages.

It is not a single straight forward narrative, it is complicated and at times contradictory, beautiful and at times horrific, affirming but also challenging and infuriating. We only do the Bible and our forebears justice if we acknowledge the diversity, complexity, the contexts and the breadth we are faced with when we try to discern a Biblical answer to a question. On any subject you'll be able to find at least two!

This is why we draw on other sources of authority to aid our discernment. The Anglican model uses the three-legged stool of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason. It seeks to balance the Bible, the teaching of the Church, and our intellects. To make the stool even more stable Methodists add experience to those three.

When I tried to find a clear Reformed model I found a multitude. Our tradition came into being through conflicts that were both global and local, and over time we've sadly managed to maintain that tradition. I bow to more learned URC historians, but my reading of our beginnings is a mix of local dissent from the established church, gatherings of ex-pat Scots, and the conversions of individuals and groups inspired by events on the continent.

We are a union of Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Churches of Christ, and to some extent each local congregation within those has a differing story of how they began.

It could be argued that three foundational issues for us are the sole authority of Scripture, Justification by faith alone, and the Priesthood of all believers. These were born out of conflict within the Roman Catholic Church of the 16th century where the emphasis was placed upon Tradition, Obedience, and the authority of the clergy.

Times and relationships have changed, and the priority that the URC gives to ecumenism, to the working together and seeking union with other churches, would be unbelievable to some of our forebears. But our heritage has produced distinctiveness to our current practice.

The Nature, Faith and Order of the URC which we share when we greet new members or induct and ordain elders, expresses our reliance on the Bible, the Sacraments, and each other for the living out of our faith.

We give the Bible the highest authority as we discern its meaning together. We give due honour to our heritage, but we stand ready to go in a different direction if we discern it to be of God. We celebrate our diversity, uphold personal conviction, and decide together whether differences hurt our unity and peace.

As Penwortham URC we have a heritage we can be proud of, but not one we should idolise. We are where we are, because people of faith over years and decades took leaps of faith as they discerned together where God was leading them.

We would not be here if they had stood still. Our calling is to listen for God, listen for that still small voice, which we can hear if we listen to each other and to those around us.

In this season of Lent we remember the forty days and nights that Jesus fasted in the Wilderness after being called by God.

Today we heard the story of a couple in their nineties being told by God to get a nursery ready.

God is still speaking. And I'm pretty sure we're not being asked for anything as drastic as what happened to Jesus or Abraham or Sarah.

But we are being called to live as Christ in this place, to create opportunities for people to discover God in ways that are relevant for them, to leave our church in a better place for the generations to come, just as those who came before did for us.

We acknowledge the gift and answer the call, giving thanks for the means of grace.

Amen

Rev'd David Coaker