

Sermon 7<sup>th</sup> August 2016. Set readings. 1. Genesis 15 vs1-6: 2. Luke 12 vs32-40

## **1. Introduction. The vital lessons from the experiences of Abraham.**

Today's OT reading of just 7 verses tells us of a life changing experience for Abraham, around 4000 years ago. So important is Abraham in the history of God's developing plan for the salvation of mankind that Genesis devotes 14 chapters to him, and Abraham features significantly in the teaching of Jesus and the rest of the NT. There are vital lessons here for us today.

### **1 The Call**

**In chapter 12 God calls Abraham with the words:** "Leave your country, your people and your Father's house and go to the land I will show you.

And then God gives this promise:

**I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.**

We read simply "So Abraham went!"

To be told you would form a great nation was pretty amazing. To be told all peoples on the whole earth would be blessed through you was, **I was going to say, unbelievable, but of course, that's the point**, it was more than amazing. But Abraham, obeyed. He believed God and took Him at His word.

I love the way this is summarised in the NT in Hebrews chapter 11.

**By faith, Abraham, when he was called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.**

No Google map, no SATNAV, he simply left his country, all his wider family and his father's home and set off, trusting the God who had called him, for everything. It was quite a challenge. He was to leave his home and set off to the unknown, for promises he would never see fulfilled. To be a great nation would take generations, and to be a blessing for all peoples on earth was barely comprehensible.

### **2. Faith means action:**

The theme of faith and trusting God dominates the story of Abraham's life. And this opening story illustrates faith isn't just thinking something in your head. It leads to action. **HE OBEYED AND WENT**

**3. And from the day Abraham heard the voice of God and obeyed, the rest of the Bible is essentially the unfolding story of the fulfilment of this promise.**

**3.1 Looking back:** From Abraham came Isaac, from Isaac, Jacob who had 12 sons leading to the nation of Israel. Eventually becoming a great nation. A nation called by God to be His special people.

And from whom eventually came the promised Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ.

**3.2 Today :** There are millions of people in the world who have received the love of God through Christ Jesus. They live in Japan, China, Burma, India and so on through every continent and just about every country in the world.

**3.3 And looking to the future :** The Apostle John had this vision of heaven, “ I looked and there before me was a great multitude which no one could number from every tribe, people and language standing before the throne and in front of the lamb. Praising God and saying:

Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen.

It all began with God’s call and promise to Abraham nearly 4000 years ago.

**4. But if the first lesson of faith in this story is obedience and action the next is that faith can be tested.**

**4.1 Where’s the baby?:** Having obeyed God and set off for this promised land, with the promise of becoming a great nation, Abraham would surely have had the expectation that Sarah, his wife, would have a child. How can you become a great nation if you don’t have any children? According to the Bible, Abraham was 75 when he received the call, now in his eighties . He was childless. Where’s the baby?

**4.2** So when we read, in today’s reading, that God calls him again, confirming that God would bless him, it’s not surprising that Abraham’s immediate reaction was “What can you give me, since I remain childless? You have given me no children!”

**4.3 But God confirmed His promise** assuring him that he would father a son from his own body. He took Abraham outside, it was clearly night time, and said, “Look up at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them” Then God added, “So shall your offspring be!”

There is something magical about looking up at the stars. I think most of us hardly do it at all. If you live in a town or city there’s too much light pollution. And we go around in cars, and nowadays people are looking down at their smart phones. And most of the time with our English weather it is all covered in cloud. But get out into the countryside on a clear night and what an amazing sight! From horizon to horizon a great, vast array of bright lights. The more you look the more you see. You become aware of the **incredible size** and **distance** and the **wonder** and **magnificence** of God’s creation.

Astronomers, scientists, all agree the universe hasn’t always existed. Somehow it came into being seemingly from nothing. A vast canopy of countless, shining stars. All totally silent .Can it go on for ever? Or if it ends, what’s outside the end? Man still doesn’t know the answers to these questions. They are beyond our comprehension.

Gazing into the stars challenges everyone about its **mystery** ,its **beauty**, its **vastness**, its **origins**, its very **purpose**.

Psalm 19 tells us, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the skies proclaim the work of His hands.”

**5. Abraham's reaction to the promise:** For a nomad, living in tents with no street lights, no light pollution Abraham would be very familiar with looking at the stars .One might have expected that as he looked up that night, he would think:

Wow, God's promise is impossible, just look at how many stars there are.

Instead, as he looked up he must have thought:

Wow, if God can create such magnificence, such vast expanses of countless stars He can surely do what He has promised to me.

And the Bible gives these wonderful words. That as Abraham took in this grandeur, **he believed God, He trusted that He could do what He promised.**

#### **6. And God counted or credited, his faith as righteousness.**

The statement "He believed God and that God credited Abrahams faith as righteousness" is never explained in the OT. But in the NT not only are the words repeated and explained they form a central and essential teaching of the Christian gospel. It's by faith that **we** are made right with God.

Indeed we are told, without faith, it is impossible to please God. Trusting our lives to Him is the very essence of being a Christian. Without it we can't begin to please Him.

Jesus emphasised the importance of faith many times in the gospels but it wasn't until after His death and resurrection that His disciples understood its full meaning.

It's what the disciples preached as recorded in Acts. In fact I hadn't noticed it before but those who accepted the gospel were all called **believers** in Acts. The name Christian came later.

#### **7. So what does it mean - "His faith was credited to him as righteousness"?**

The clearest explanation of the gospel is written by the apostle Paul in the first 8 chapters of his letter to the Romans.

Right at the start he declares, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed , a righteousness that is by faith, from first to last.

**It is the same righteousness that was credited to Abraham when He believed God**

**It simply means " having a right standing with God": as confirmed by several modern translations of the Bible.**

**Let me read you one very clear example.**

**I am not ashamed of the good news. It is God's power. And it will save everyone who believes. The good news shows how God makes people right with Himself. From beginning to end becoming right with God depends on a person's faith.**

**8. In the first 3 chapters of Romans** Paul has reasoned that **all have sinned** and fallen short of the glory of God and **the consequences of sin** are **alienation from God** resulting in **separation and death**.

He then explains the gospel. It's like a law court. Mankind before the judge is found guilty and deserving of judgement, for all have sinned. The penalty is death. For the wages of sin is death. But then the judge declares that the penalty has already been paid. God's own son has died in our place and offers full forgiveness and reconciliation with God to all who turn from their sinful life and put their faith in God through Jesus Christ.

For though the wages of sin is death, the gift of God is eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.

We are to receive God's gift by faith. We don't deserve it, we can do nothing of ourselves to make it right, it's by grace, God's outrageous, underserved grace. It is based on Divine love. This is the gospel. The good news! It's the very essence of the Christian faith.

**9. And as if that were not enough there are further consequences of being justified:** Paul goes on to say: **Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.**

It's as if having been to court, been found guilty, and then heard the amazing news of being freely justified and made right with God we sinners come out of the court and stand on the steps outside, in the dazzling sunshine. And discover we now have free access into all the blessings of the Christian life. This grace in which we stand.

Forgiveness of all our sin

Peace with God

God's love poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit

Sin no longer has its control over us

We anticipate the resurrection of our bodies and the life of the world to come

And we enjoy and share fellowship together..

We have been saved through faith. It is the gift of God. Hallelujah!

**10. I want to make 2 points in closing.**

**10.1. Firstly, it's clearly important that we are sure we have made that personal commitment to Christ. It's not something anybody else can do for you. Neither is it something we can drift in and out of as we please. It is a deep, personal commitment of our very selves to God by faith.**

**At one point Jesus said to the crowds, enter in by the narrow gate that leads to life. What did He mean?**

**Not so long ago I went to see Middlesbrough play Tottenham at White House Lane in London. The trains were crowded. We all walked in a great mass to the ground. But when we got to the turnstiles I found it quite an ordeal. To prevent people jumping over and getting in unlawfully the turnstiles were approached by very narrow tunnels. I was with a group, but we all had to present our tickets one by one. When it was my turn it would have been no good saying I'm with these people, they come every week, or I'm a regular Spurs supporter, I needed my own entrance ticket. We enter one by one.**

So I encourage you all to confirm in your hearts that you have received God's gift of love, forgiveness and eternal life by coming to Christ by faith. And if you are not sure to make that act of commitment today in a simple prayer. Please talk to me or someone in the church afterwards if you need to know more.

**10.2. Secondly, whilst eternal life is a free gift from God, to be received by faith, we are now to show our love and commitment by living out the Christian life in practice.**

**As someone has said, the entrance fee to the kingdom of heaven is free, it's a gift.**

**But the annual subscription is everything we have and are.**

I recently went to farm in Leeds where a Christian group have cared for a whole range of people, men and women, young and old, who are homeless, have been abused, have mental or physical disabilities. I bought a little book that describes their experiences for the passed 30 years. Indeed it is a living commentary of people living totally in dependence on God for His provision and guidance. I found it inspirational. I shall close by reading the final paragraph.

**As we try to take on board the huge challenges of the future, our task remains unchanged: for ours is the task that has belonged to every Christian and every church of every generation. It is simply this:**

**To share the love of Jesus with as many people as we are able;**

**To be faithful to Him and to try with all our being to simply be like Him**

**To love as He loves; To care as He cares.**

**Oh how we have failed Him but we must embrace that vision and march on for His glory.**