

Reflection for Pentecost 5 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

During this early period of Sundays after Pentecost this year our Old Testament readings come from the book of Genesis and tell the story of Abraham. It is a story which, if you look at it as whole, challenges our perceived understanding of the way God works and the very nature of faith. It's the story of faith that not only hears, but also has the courage to respond and act. Above all, it is the story of God at work, and we can only marvel at it. This is the very beginning of God's salvation plan that will come to its fullness centuries later on the cross and in the resurrection.

As the narrative opens Abraham hears God calling to him. Leave everything you know to be safe and secure and take a giant step of faith out into the unknown; trusting totally in God and his promises; the main promises to Abraham being that he would father a great nation, that his name would be great and that he would be blessed. The question is, how many of us would be prepared to take that same sort of step? As you reflect on the narrative the absurdity of what is being asked, becomes all too clear.

Abraham was not young at the time of God's first calling. The story says he was 75 years old, and his wife Sarah 65 and they had no children. Under normal circumstances their hope of producing a family was receding daily and may already be gone, yet it is to this man that God says "I will make you a great nation", it is on you and your subsequent generations that I will build my plan for salvation. Time and again, as one ponders the pages of scripture and the history of the church, and even maybe our own experience of God, it is through the things that seem madness and folly that God seems to work. It is only when God is truly in control, when we have lost the ability to say "see what I have done" that we see God's power and love at work in the most profound and amazing ways.

In the call of Abraham, God makes what appears to be the wrong move. He chooses two seniors with no children, and no hope of children. His charge to them is to go to a strange country, and around them he will build a nation.

Later in the narrative, when Abraham has left his home and has reached "The Promised Land", now even older and still childless, God repeats his promise. "*I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you.*" In time, God does fulfil that promise and Isaac is born.

A God who works like that is a God who always provides hope even where there appears to be none.

Today's reading from chapter 22 of Genesis, is referred to as the binding of Isaac or in Hebrew (הַעֲקִידָה) hā'Aqēdā. It is a narrative that in our modern world raises all sorts of questions that we would prefer not to ask or answer, but at the heart of the story lies a question that Abraham has to answer. Are you willing to sacrifice everything including the one through whom the promise is to be fulfilled – Isaac? Abraham's answer is clear - yes - at which point God provides the ram for sacrifice.

If you go to the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem, pass through the large main doors, and then climb the steps up to Calvary, you are confronted with two altars side by side - the Orthodox, which I find far to ornate and next to that the Latin altar. Behind the Latin altar is mural of the crucifixion of Christ and on the wall next to the Latin altar another mural of the binding of Isaac with the angel stepping in to save Isaac. Both these murals symbolise the willingness to give up everything. Christ is willing to die to bring salvation. Abraham is willing to let go of that which is most precious to him, his son, in order to fulfill what he

believes to be the will of God. Both images reflect the idea of a sacrificial lamb taking the place of someone else.

One of the things I have had to learn on my Christian pilgrimage is that at times we have to take risks with God. Taking risks like Abraham did – stepping out in faith, responding to God not always being able to see what is over the hill or even directly in front of us. It is often at these points, the points of greatest challenge that we grow most and receive the greatest blessing.

One writer has summed up the Abraham story, like this: “to stay in safety is to remain barren: to leave in risk is to have hope” Something for all of us to ponder.

As you reflect on Abraham’s story another thing that stands out is where the hope and faith he has is leading him. Abraham did receive many blessings because of trust in God. “*Abram was a very rich man, with sheep, goats, and cattle, as well as silver and gold,*” but God’s plan looks much further into the future Abraham and his story. Abraham lives with the promises and not the reality. “*I am going to give you and your descendants all the land that you see, and it will be yours forever.*” Or “*through you I will bless all the nations.*” When Abraham is laid to rest what land does he own? Simply the burial ground at Hebron where he and his wife are laid to rest.

In these promises to Abraham God is looking through Abraham to Christ: Israel, the nation that Abraham, by risking all and following God, was to found lies at the very heart of the salvation plan. It is from them and through them that God will reveal himself, and from whom Christ will come. A nation created not to be God’s special people to the exclusion of all the rest of humanity: on the contrary, they are to be created as God’s special people so that the rest of humanity can be drawn towards fellowship with God, so that you and I can have salvation. It is only as you read the New Testament and particularly Acts and the epistles that the true reality of the promises to Abraham become clear.

Yet, as you read the story of Abraham, all this hope for the future rests on him - on Abraham’s willingness to have faith in God, to take the risk of stepping out and putting his hope in God and God alone.

As the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews sums it up

It was faith that made Abraham obey when God called him to go out to a country which God had promised to give him.

It was faith that made Abraham able to become a father, even though he was too old and Sarah herself could not have children.

It was faith that made Abraham offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice when God put Abraham to the test.

The Abraham story does mark one of the key moments in God’s plan for salvation that runs right through the pages of scripture. In doing so it also challenges us in our journey. Is our faith in God strong enough to hear his call whatever that may be and are we prepared to take the risks necessary to see his work through?

Is our hope, our faith in God and God alone?