

SERMON – 15/10/23

Genesis 12:1-9

The Lord said to Abram, 'I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you... and all people on earth will be blessed through you.' (Genesis 12:2,3)

We have read this morning of the call of Abram to leave his country, his people and his father's household and to go to the land that the Lord would show him. Actually, if you look closely at the opening verse of chapter 12 and read it right through from the closing few verses of the previous chapter, you are quickly able to discern that Abram's response to God was not just as straightforward as it is sometimes portrayed. 'The Lord *had* said to Abram "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.'" Yes, but that had been years previously. Abram and his wife Sarai *had* got up and left, in obedience to God's call, but they had not done as God had commanded them and left their family behind. Abram's father and many of his relatives had come with them. Abram was called to go to Shechem (which today is called Nablus and is in the Palestinian Territories on the West Bank of the River Jordan which have been occupied by the Israelis since the Six Day War of 1967). They had followed the River Euphrates from Ur (modern-day Nasiriya in Iraq) but when they came to Charan (now Urfa near the border between Turkey and Syria today) we are told that they *settled* there for a time. Although we don't know how old Abram was when he was first called, we *are* told that it wasn't until he was 75 years old that he and his wife finally left Charan to go to the land where God had originally called them.

This relatively small part of the world that has tragically been the centre of world attention again over the last week has been the centre of God's action in the world at least since Abram's time 4000 years ago. Asia, Africa and Europe come together in these square miles; civilisation was cradled there. In some mysterious way, that corner of the earth is important in the purposes of God the Lord – He called Abram there, He led His chosen people to

that Promised Land, He walked there Himself in the person of Jesus Christ.

It is highly significant in these days of tension between Arab and Western civilisations, between people of Jewish and Christian and Islamic background that this man Abram has a place not only in Jewish history and in Christian faith, but that he is recognised by Muslims too both as an example of godly living and as the father also of the Arab race. How God must weep over the actions of both Israeli and Palestinian leaders alike and the truly awful suffering of ordinary civilians in Israel and Palestine alike. But the challenge to us today is to hear God's Word for *us*, to learn from Abram's call and to understand God's promise to him: '*All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.*' We seem very far from blessing in these days.

But what I'd like to suggest to you this morning is that these words about call and about blessing (and all that lies behind them) are for each one of us in Christ, and I want to explore with you today what it means for *us* to heed and to answer God's call and to take hold of and share God's promise of blessing.

We recount the great stories of the Bible with the ease of familiarity. God called Abram to leave his country, his people and his father's household and to go to the land that the Lord would show him. And off into the unknown he went. Simple. But think of how *you* would react to a similar call. Leave your country. That is to say, leave behind what is familiar – the geography, the weather, the sights and sounds and tastes of home. Leave your people. That is to say, leave behind what is comfortable – your language, your culture, your diet, the network of contacts and relationships that have sustained you during your life. Leave your father's household. That is to say, leave behind those whom you most love and those who care for you through thick and thin. And off you go to somewhere you have never been before, to circumstances that you know nothing about, to potential dangers and constant uncertainty. Would *you* go? Would *you* be prepared to exchange all those things that combine to give you points of reference in life and allow the Lord Himself to be your only point of reference? Make no mistake about it, that is a very tall order indeed. Despite his shortcomings, Abram is rightly

regarded as a giant of the faith, because he trusted God in ways that leave most of us in the shadows.

What was it, I wonder, that persuaded Abram to answer God's call? It wasn't, I don't think, because Abram was just ready for a change and this opportunity seemed to come along at the right moment. It wasn't, I don't think, because he was naturally adventurous and always on the lookout for a new challenge. I believe it was because the promises that God made to him as He extended the call to him so deeply touched and inspired him that he could do nothing else. '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. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse; *and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.*' Yes, God was calling him to leave his country, his people, his father's household and go to a far-off place, but in the process God was promising not only to bless him in every possible way, but to make him a blessing to others and through him to bless the whole world.

Something very similar was going on in the disciples of Jesus when He said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.' He called them and in the process He made them a promise that they would be fruitful in His service and be a blessing to the whole world. And they left their nets and followed Him. And if you think of the hundreds and thousands of millions of people who have heard and accepted the promises of Jesus as He has called them (called *us*) to faith down through the succeeding centuries, you realise that the same process of challenging call and promised blessing is still underway. 'Come to me, all you who labour and are burdened (a call) *and I will give you rest*' (a blessing). 'Whoever believes in me will live even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me *will never die.*' (A call and a blessing). 'Go into all the world and make disciples... And *surely I am with you always.*' (Again, a call and a blessing).

Of course, it's very tempting to idolise the great figures of Bible history, but we need to remember that folk like Abram were just as human as we are and they didn't always get things quite right. God called Abram, as we saw, to leave his country, his people and his father's household and go to Canaan, but while he and

Sarai *did* leave Ur, the fact is that God's call was not fully obeyed. Abram did *not* detach himself from his family as God has asked him to, and needless to say, that had repercussions. Even if Abram wanted to press on from Charan to Shechem, the fact that the rest of the family wanted to settle in Charan put pressure on him to stay with them, and even when he does ultimately go on, he takes his nephew Lot with him (and that has repercussions further on in the story). Or, to take another example, from the passage following the one we read today, when severe famine came to Canaan and Abram and his wife go down to Egypt in search of food, Abram passes his wife off as his sister so that no-one will be tempted to do away with *him* and take his beautiful wife for themselves. There were consequences to follow *that* too. Pharaoh himself took Sarai for himself and although he treated Abram well, the adultery or the bigamy – whatever you like to call it – came to light eventually. Abram and Sarai were fortunate to be exiled rather than executed.

The point I'm making is that while Abram *did* heed the call of God, he only gradually fulfilled *all* that God had commanded him. He took steps in the right direction but he still had to yield himself completely to God. He *said* that he trusted God, and in many ways he *did* live by that faith, but when it came to a particularly difficult set of circumstances, he thought he had a better way of keeping himself safe and nearly brought disaster upon himself and his wife by concealing the truth rather than entrusting the matter to the Lord. Thinking about it, maybe it was faithless of Abram to go to Egypt at all, rather than to trust God to provide for them in the promised land of Canaan.

Does Abram's experience ring bells with you? It does with me. How often do we take our first steps of faith with confidence only to get bogged down long before we've reached our destination? How often do we hold back from trusting God completely because we think we can do better ourselves? 'Faith, says the writer to the Hebrews, is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.' In faith, Abram set off into the unknown with God Himself as his new point of reference, with the promise of God's blessing (for himself and his loved ones and for all the world) to embolden and envision him. He didn't always move on

in faith. Sometimes he took a step sideways; sometimes he even turned and went the wrong way altogether; but part of the wonder of God's call and the faithfulness of His promises is that even though sometimes (perhaps even often) we make mistakes, He continues to call us in His ways and He continues to bless us and others through us when we walk according to His purposes.

You may think that the words 'calling' and 'blessing' may sound too grand, too spiritual to be applied to you, but the truth of the matter that I proclaim to you this morning is that God is calling all of us to play our part in the fulfilling of His plans in the world, and that supremely, in Jesus Christ, He is holding out to us the promise of His blessing as we walk with Him, and as we share the Good News with the world around us. Do you hear God's call to you this morning? Are you inspired to share in His blessing? Then, get up from where you've got stuck in a rut, turn round and go back to where you took that wrong turning, leave what you're doing, and go where God is calling you. The blessing will not only be for you but for so many others.

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