

SERMON – 5/11/23**'Faith'**

Introduction

A couple of weeks ago we read the story of the Call of Abram (whose name means exalted father) in which the Lord promised that he would become a great nation. Today we will read some more of the story of this man's walk with God. First, as he and his wife Sarai grow older and remain childless he begins to doubt God's promise.

Genesis 15:1-6

Those final words are hugely significant – they are the basis of what the apostle Paul teaches in Romans and Galatians about being justified by faith and were Martin Luther's inspiration in challenging the teaching of the Roman Church that led to the Reformation.

In the words of the writer to the Hebrews, 'faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see'. We human beings find that incredibly hard and Abram and Sarai were no different. They could not see how God could fulfil the promise to make them a great nation when Sarai was beyond child-bearing years, so they hatched a plan to have a family through a surrogate – nothing new under the sun! Abram slept with Sarai's servant girl Hagar and she fell pregnant. Of course that caused difficulties between Sarai and Hagar but in due course a son was born – Ishmael (whose name means God hears). Abram is 86 when his son is born but that's not the end of the story.

Our second reading takes up the story.

Genesis 17:1-27

Sermon

"Abram bowed down with his face touching the ground."

(Gen.17:3)

"Abraham bowed down with his face touching the ground."

(Gen.17:17)

I have struggled this week to know quite which way to go with today's sermon not only because there are so many really important themes embedded in the verses we have read today

and so many different threads from elsewhere in the Scriptures and beyond that can be traced back to these chapters, but also because there are a whole lot of little points of interest in the text that could each become a sermon on its own, so please forgive me if this turns into a hotch-potch of unrelated messages and just listen out for God's Word to you in the midst of it all.

There are messages here about the character of God – the God who is revealed here as El-Shaddai, God Almighty; the God who promises and who fulfils those promises; the God whose ways are not our ways and who can do the impossible; the God who wants to enter into a lasting relationship with people – a covenant – and to mark that relationship with memorable signs like circumcision in the reading and like the Lord's Supper which we will celebrate after the service.

There are messages here about disappointments and messages about faith; about what it means to trust God (or to mistrust God) and about the transformation that can happen when you do believe.

There are messages here about the significance of names. Abram whose name means 'exalted father' is here renamed Abraham – 'father of many nations' – and the narrative centres on the birth of two sons, Ishmael (which means 'God hears') and Isaac (which means 'he laughs'), one born to Hagar, a servant girl and surrogate mother, the other to Sarah, his wife well beyond natural child-bearing years.

There are messages here for each of us and indeed for the whole world, and maybe that is where I need to start this morning because not far from any of our minds this morning is what is going on in Israel and Palestine at this time.

It is hugely significant at this time that Abram, the exalted father, Abraham, the father of many nations is honoured by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. Today in synagogues, in churches and in mosques across Israel and Palestine and across the world, the name of Abraham will be spoken almost 4000 years after he lived. Ethnic Jews speak of him as 'our father Abraham' and regard him as their biological ancestor, and religious Jews consider him to be the first Jew – parts of his story are read every

Sabbath in synagogue worship and the act of circumcision whose origins we read about earlier is at the heart of the identity of the Jewish people. But ethnic Arabs also trace their biological lineage to Ibrahim through Ismail, and religious Muslims, most of whom also practise circumcision, regard him as one of a line of prophets that includes Adam, Moses and Jesus as well as Muhammad. "We're a' Jock Tamson's bairns," we sometimes say. Well, Palestinians and Israelis are certainly all children of Abraham, the father of many nations, which gives a whole new level of atrocity to what is happening in Gaza today. At the start of the service I read words from Ephesians about Christ being our peace who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. If the apostle Paul had been writing those words today he would have been addressing them alike to the Jewish Christians worshipping in Israel today, to the Palestinian Christians worshipping in the ancient churches of Gaza and the West Bank, and to us who are ethnically more diverse but who are all one in Christ Jesus.

It is ultimately to Jesus, son of Abraham and son of God, that the story of Abraham points us for it is ultimately not through by physical descent either through Ishmael and the Arabs or through Isaac and the Jews that the descendants of Abraham become as numerous as the stars in the sky but by faith and through Jesus. As Abram himself discovered and as we must surely see as we look at our war-torn world, it is not by the physical that God's Kingdom comes but by the Spirit of God and by faith in Christ. To quote again words from Ephesians 2 with which I began the service this morning: "Christ himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit."

But maybe that is just too big a message for any of us to get our heads round in one go, so let me home in on the text with which I

began the sermon. Actually it is two verses because the same words are repeated although the context is very different in each case. In verse 3 when he is still called Abram and again in verse 17 when he is now known as Abraham, we read that he fell face down. But it's not the change of name that is significant but the change of attitude. In verse 3 Abram falls on his face before God in worship and adoration – he is utterly overwhelmed by the promise that is being repeated to him again by God that he will make a covenant with him and give him many descendants. But in verse 17 Abraham falls on his face not because he is worshipping but because he is doubled up with laughter. “Can a man have a child when he is a hundred years old? Can Sarah have a child at ninety?”

As I reflect on all that is going on in these chapters that is where I find myself arrested by God's Word and so perhaps it is here that the message lies for us this morning. We are so fickle in our walk with God. We come before the Lord in worship and fall as it were on our faces in adoration, overwhelmed by the promises that are ours in Christ. We celebrate with great joy the covenant into which we are called to enter when Jesus offers us broken bread and a cup of wine. But then we step out into the real world – a world where faith is tested by the daily challenges we face and we are tempted to find our own human answers, like Abram did by choosing to have a child with Hagar rather than by trusting God's promise, a world where we prefer to work for our own salvation rather than to believe God and have it credited to us as righteousness as it was to Abram. Can God really bring peace in Israel and Palestine, in Ukraine and Yemen and wherever else the bombs rain down today? Can God really revive His Church in Scotland when all the signs are of decline? Is nothing really impossible with God? Is our faith any greater or less than Abraham's?

As you and I are reminded today of the Abraham who is held up to probably the majority of the world population as someone to emulate, what will our response be? Is it one of reverent faith or is it one of mocking disbelief?

What has God promised you? This Book is laden with God's promises to folks like Abraham as to those who went before him

and to his descendants in the faith. Maybe, like Abram, you have left those promises in the past and forgotten about them, so perhaps today is the day that they come to mind again and you fall on your face in awe of what the Lord is offering you.

What has God asked of you? God challenged Abram to walk before the Lord and be blameless, and for him that meant submitting himself and his whole household to circumcision. For us it means hearing afresh the call of Jesus, 'Follow me!' Repent and be baptised and allow yourself to be taught to obey everything that Christ has commanded.

What is possible with God? Well, everything is *possible*. Do we believe that? Are we prepared to persevere in believing prayer until God's time is right. Perhaps you have been waiting a long time for an answer to your prayers. Well, there were 13 years between the events in the two chapters we read from this morning but as the apostle Peter writes: "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." (2 Pet.3:8-9)

Perhaps this morning we find ourselves flat on the floor, unsure whether to laugh or to cry. Perhaps this morning we need, rather, to fall on our faces before the Lord. Perhaps this morning we need to look to Abram who, first of all believed God.