

Lent 2 (C)
March 4, 2007: Wesley 9.00am & 10.30am

Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from his prison cell in Berlin in December 1943:

My thoughts and feelings seem to be getting more and more like those of the Old Testament, and in recent months I have been reading the Old Testament much more than the New.

It is only when one knows the un-utterability of the name of God that one can utter the name of Jesus Christ; it is only when one loves life and the earth so much that without them everything seems to be over that one may believe in the resurrection and a new world; it is only when one submits to God's law that one may speak of grace.

[Letters and Papers from Prison, 5 December 1943]

Today's story from the Old Testament about Abraham's faith is a profound precursor to all we hold dear in the Christian Church. It comes from one of the most important chapters in the entire Bible. Genesis 15 has been judged by many scholars to be the oldest statement of what is to be treasured about Abraham's faith. And it is especially important because it addresses two basic issues for us all - faith and doubt. Bonhoeffer is right that there is life giving news in the Old Testament. *When we are listening to the beginning of faith for Abraham, we are listening to the beginning of faith for us all.*

.....

You may recall the story of Abraham and Sarah. They were called out of their home town (11: 30) by a powerful experience of God (12:1).

Now the Lord said to Abram,
'Go from your country and your kindred
and your father's house,
to the land that I will show you.
I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you...
So Abram went, as the Lord had told him .

Here is the first new and unusual thing about this religion of Abraham and Sarah... Here are people who follow God's call, and live for God's glory, not because they are granted evidence of God's victory in the present, but because they believe in God's promises for the future. And they trust that God will see them fulfilled.

Abraham and Sarah's trust is especially honoured because of the problem they faced. Sarah was unable to bear a child.

So when they could not even have one child of their own
it must have taken extraordinary courage, and a profound trust,
for them to hold firm to the promise
that God would make of them a great nation.

Yet they believed, and set out.

Especially important is verse six, which reads:
“[Abraham] believed the Lord,
and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness”,

Here is the second treasure in the Abraham story.
On face value, it seems a something-nothing.
Yet this statement is the ground on which Paul
mounts his case for the singular importance of *faith*,
in putting us back into a right relationship with God.

...It is not tasks undertaken, or correct theology,
or a perfect record, or good works which God honours,
it is faith.

Of course, our faith draws us into a deeper engagement with the world,
but it is the faith that puts us right, not our personal achievements.

.....

They travelled to Canaan, but found only famine,
so they moved down to Egypt.
Abraham did well for a time in Egypt –
and for a reason not often preached on.
He managed to deceive Pharaoh into having an affair with Sarah
by convincing Pharaoh that she was not his wife at all, but only his sister.

Here, I dare say, is another treasure to remember.
We may think that our families have all sorts of troubles,
and that they never measure up.
But God’s biblical families are just the same.
They are not the brightest lights, nor are they models of family values;
they are not infrequently compromised, and struggle.
Yet, they are the ones who are willing to trust,
and to follow.
They have faith.

When Pharaoh inevitably discovered Abraham’s deception,
he banished Abraham and Sarah from the land,
and so they went back into Canaan, for a second time.
There, they settled down.

We are now quite some time after they set out,
yet the emptiness at the centre of Abraham and Sarah’s life,
remains untouched.
They have travelled in search of the fulfilment of what God has promised,
yet the promise has been delayed and delayed.
They have no child, and here Abraham is at the point
of serious doubt.

Now we come face-to-face with the third and most surprising treasure of this passage. The dilemma that is unavoidable for all who seek to live by faith - the dilemma of doubt.

Abraham has pretty well had enough.

He twice says to God: How am I to know...?

And then we read:

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abraham, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. (15:12)

It is the deep darkness of doubt,
the darkness of not knowing what we can trust.

And yet Abraham continued to believe! Why?

Within the first six verses of chapter 15

he has moved from "O Lord, you have given me nothing" to

"He believed, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness"

What moved Abraham from his doubts to a new response?

What is the lesson to us from the Old Testament

about the nature of Abraham's faith?

Dostoyevsky writes in the introduction to *The Brothers Karamazov*, which, incidentally, is a book all about faith in a world of evil:

So it is not as a boy, then, that I believe in Christ and confess Him,
but through the great *crucible of doubt* that my *hosanna* has passed.

[the emphasis is in the original].

Abraham's decision to keep trusting in God

has little to do with new evidence for God

or new evidence of his or Sarah's fertility.

As Walter Brueggemann writes:

Surely [his change of heart] is not because he feels
new generative powers in his loins!!

Rather, the change comes because Abraham is able to pass through his doubts,
and still rely on the promise speaker.

He has now permitted God to be, not a hypothesis,
but *the voice around which his life will be organised*.

He has faith that God can cause a break-point
between the exhausted present and a buoyant future.

He has faith in the possibility of a new beginning.

He has faith in the possibility of a pure *Genesis*.

He has faith.

This is how this faith of Abraham is.

He did not move from protest and doubt to faith and following
by persuasion.

Rather, it came by the sovereign grace of God

which he experienced – as we are told in the very first verse – as a vision.

"After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision".

The door between humans and God

is more often opened from the outside in, than from the inside out.
We struggle to believe that in an age of high science and technology.
But this is one thing we cannot do for ourselves.
We need a voice or, like Abraham, a vision –
and we need to trust in the possibility of that voice and vision
if we are to see God.

.....

The question posed and answered by Genesis 15 is:
Why, and how, does one continue to trust solely God's *promise*
when the evidence against the promise is all around?
We live with un-fulfilment, and searching, and doubt.
Christianity does not provide immunity from this.
In fact, you could say it is intrinsic to this faith
which Abraham fathered.

But let us learn at least this much from our passage today:
Living in the present by faith and hope is a matter of daily decision,
in which we leave behind us the old existence
to which Christ has already died for us
and begin to live by the promise and power of the coming new creation –
even within the persisting forms of the old.

Revd P Walker