



Auckland Community Church

The Promise to Abraham

Given by Peter Lineham on the 13th March 2006

Readings : Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Troubled People

I have been talking for the last two weeks by e-mail to a lesbian woman who has been deeply troubled. She is so anxious and scared in herself. She fears that what she is in herself is condemned by God and yet she struggled with herself. Her background is from a church that preaches salvation by faith but all she has heard is legalism, how can this be?

It's not easy to know what to say to such a person. Part of the problem is the tough picture of discipleship in Mark 8. Verse 35 tells us that:

Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self. (Mark 8:35)

And this can lead us to think it must be miserable to be a disciple. Jesus tells us to follow him, but how can we do it? Why would we want to do it? What is a real disciple of Jesus? Is this a possible way of life at all for us? The other readings encourage us to think about the life of Abraham, and this is such a great help for us. For this figure of Abraham, revered by the three great monotheistic faiths, has so much to say to us. Abraham is a model of how to live, he and his wife Sarah are like the parents of all who believe (Romans 4:11). So how did they do it?

Promises, Promises

From the beginning, notice how God called Abraham with reiterated promises. It is the kind of thing we would all like to hear. They were extraordinary things, these promises.

- a. **LAND:** He was promised all the land from the river of Egypt (the Nile?) to the River Euphrates. All the land his eyes saw on the day when Lot grabbed it (13:14 15) was to be his, and more. What an amazing promise.
- b. **DESCENDANTS:** This land was promised to his descendants descendants born from his own body, that God promised to be as numerous as the dust (13:16 17), as many as the stars (15:5) and both (22:17).
- c. **BLESSING TO THE WORLD:** Back in 12:1 3 is the promise that Abraham will be the agent of blessing to the whole human race. His name will be made great he will be famous. He will touch all the peoples of the world. At the end of his life, when he has been willing to make the ultimate sacrifice, God promises him that those descendants will not only dominate, but also bring blessing to the nations. (22:17 18) These were extraordinary promises.

God's Commitment to Abraham

If God gives so casually, will he also confiscate his gifts easily? No. Because what God did was he entered into a treaty with Abraham. Genesis 17:4 says that God is making a covenant with Abraham. This is the language of a treaty, such as nations make with each other. That pattern from the secular world shows better than any religious language the solemnity of the commitment God made to Abraham. It was a formal, public commitment to

do all these things for Abraham, and it even involved a new revelation of God as El Shaddai, God the almighty provider.

Nor is it just for Abraham. It goes on to make promises for his descendants promises which the New Testament applies not just to Jews but to all the children of Abraham.

I'm establishing my covenant between me and you, a covenant that includes your descendants, a covenant that goes on and on and on, a covenant that commits me to be your God and the God of your descendants. (Genesis 17:7)

And God made them freely to Abraham. Abraham did not could not have bargained for them. It was God's grace, not Abraham's bargaining power, which gave him a good deal.

Why the Promise?

Remember that Genesis 11 is the story of the people of the tower of Babel who wanted to make their name great by their own efforts. They failed. In Genesis 12 God promises that the person who humbly trusts him, not setting up to bargain with Him, is the one who will arrive.

Remember that in the ancient world, family and home and religious blessing were all found by not moving. They were inherited. Abraham had given up his inheritance. He had become a traveller. Now look at what God gave him in these promises.

God had not been forced to offer them to Abraham, to buy him off. They were given freely by God. God gave it because he had become the friend of Abraham.

And what did he get?

And yet Abraham received for his faith at that time. What fulfilment did he receive of the promise of land? The catechism Jewish parents recited to their children began with the words: A wandering Aramean was my father (Deuteronomy 26:5). When he got to Canaan he found that the land the land promised to him was occupied and all the title deeds sold. It is populated by people who are obstacles to the immediate fulfilment of the promise. Abraham's status was simply as a resident alien.

In his own small way he was a blessing to the people he lived among, but he was also separate from them in attitude, for while he mixed with them and helped them (separation does not exclude this), he was cut off, not permitted to take anything from them (See 14: 18 24). He was told that hundreds of years must pass before the land could be his (15:12 16), and although symbolically he surveyed the land building altars and digging wells (see 21.33) yet the only land he ever owned was a graveyard for his wife (23: 1 20).

Look too at the promise of descendants. He was already 75 years old, and since he had no descendant, he felt forced first to settle his inheritance upon his nephew (13:8 13), then on a servant (15:2), a child of a concubine, and then when after 25 years he gained a son, and after another few years the son grew as a youth, he was asked to give up his backstop, send Ishmael away, and then when even humanly his future posterity hung on a thread, he was asked to sacrifice Isaac.

Does this seem tough? This is the essence of faith. Cite Hebrews 11:13 16.

What was the Condition for the Promises?

But you need to understand that Abraham was completely contented about this. He had decided to follow God, and that was it. It was enough for him that God had promised him

so much.

He would, I think, have paid any price. He had gone across the desert in search of God. He had circumcised his children at the request of God. He was even to give up his first child at the request of God, and he was prepared to sacrifice his second child too because God asked. He was all in for God.

Yet look more closely at the story, as Paul does in Romans 4, and you will see that this God who demands total obedience is also, unlike every other religion, very simple in what he asks. There was no ritual requirement. Jews thought that God demanded circumcision, and so this was to them the basic requirement. Today many people try to turn the demands of God into the rituals of religion □ baptism, communion, fasting etc. Many people in all sorts of religious worlds including Christians think that this is the way to win.

But this is to misunderstand the circumstances of Abraham. For Abraham was both an intimate friend of God and very inconsistent in his rituals. There is no formula really from Abraham's life.

Equally if we think that Abraham got there because of his total obedience, because of his total surrender, there are stories of gross inconsistencies in Abraham's behaviour.

God did not demand that all Abraham's doubts cease. Abraham, the man of faith, kept asking hard questions of God, questions that to our mind are nearly blasphemous. Wasn't 15:2 a real doubter's question? Yet God said Abraham was a man of faith.

Moreover God did not demand perfection from his servant. Sin and failure did not breach the covenant. God asked only for trust, to take the covenant seriously.

Abraham the Disciple

No, the heart of Abraham was not ritual, not obedience, but faith. Faith is not a difficult thing, obedience to the call of God is not complicated, and yet it is very threatening. God's acts are the basis of Abraham's hope, but God expects something from Abraham in return. Genesis 17:1. In essence the terms are faith. Faith meant an act of trust, a passive acceptance of God's plans. Outwardly the requirement was circumcision (16: 9-14), the cut in the flesh which indicated that he was in the covenant which God had □ cut □ with his servant. It was effectively a sign that his covenant, his calling was accepted.

Abraham heard the voice of God, and then he acted. Faith equalled obedience. In other words the call of God was not just a religious feeling □, not just a sentiment which sweeps over you in church, a cultic act. It was a life feeling, it was to be lived out in life. All the blessings, the promises, were linked with real living. And the obedience and faith needed this quality too.

Abraham's faith lay in accepting God's promise, his covenant. This, not anything else, was the basis of his standing with God (15:5), of his call from God it was his acceptance of the word of God which gave him his standing with God.

Yet God did expect discipleship. It is easy to race pass the words we read, without sensing their significance. In the ancient world, family and home were deeply significant. Ancestral bonds were the source of all security. They were the place of blessing. Abraham left them all behind.

Everything hinges on Faith (Romans 4:16-25)

Paul's interpretation of this story is significant. Paul uses the story of Abraham to explain the nature of faith. To so many people this is such a mysterious thing, but Paul sees faith as the crucial spiritual value and always has been from Old Testament times onwards.

Faith has the Character of Hope (4:16-19)

This was how it showed in Abraham's case. He was given a series of promises. This is because of a key principle.

Faith believes the Promises of God (4:20-22)

Faith does not look at the human situation. It takes the promises of God seriously. Paul had understood God's knowledge and God's power. He trusted the promises and revelation of God v. 20. Cranfield comments on this verse A man has been overpowered, held and sustained by God's promises. Hudson Taylor commented Have faith in God = hold onto the faithfulness of God.

All God's Blessings and Promises are for People of Faith

They are only on account of faith (4:9). Abraham, as his name implies, is father of all the faithful (4:12, 16).

Faith is the only way God ever deals with humans. Some divide up the Old Testament from the New Testament, suggesting a contrast between works and grace, but this is not the Bible's own approach. Genesis teaches faith; so do Psalms (4:6-8). Jewish restoration comes only by faith in Christ (Romans 10 & 11:23).

God's Calculation (4:22-25)

Reckoning is a word from calculations and from mathematics. This is how God does his sums.

More fundamentally it is a word from the law courts. It works out the basis upon which God deals with people. God does not see us as we are. Because we calculate ourselves in him, God calculates us in him too. The calculation does not involve trust in the future but in what God has done. Hence the death and resurrection of Jesus are our security.

You cannot have it Both Ways (4:10)

Paul develops this point in Romans 7 and spells it out in Galatians 2:18-21. Works exclude faith. So don't nullify faith. We are free from the law and if this fills us with fear, then read Romans 6. We are in unity with Christ. Christ's work is interior. It more than replaces the work of the law. We are free to be what we want to be. Galatians 5 shows that the best good is done by people who are not forced to do it.

Conclusion

I am so very conscious that some of us here struggle with faith. We feel that belief is very difficult indeed, and we feel such failures. Sometimes for people in the gay, lesbian and trans-gendered world there is a special feeling of disconnection, and the call to a life of faith seems ludicrous.

It is certainly challenging. But if you want to experience the mercy of God in all its richness, then you have to live your life with God at the centre. You have trust God practically. It is not a life of law and ritual and regulation. There is a way back when you wander away. But the only satisfaction and hope lies in walking in the footsteps of Abraham.

Cite George Herbert, Love.

Relevance for us

How much our lives lack this kind of staying power! We need to learn the lessons. I wonder if I am speaking to those who feel a failure in religious terms, with no sense of calling from and purpose in God? Recall these principles:

- a. Faith in God is pointless unless God has spoken. No dramatic acts of self sacrifice for him will earn his approval. He is not pleased by grand acts of uncalled for surrender.
- b. God's call means at root a call to accept what he has said. Faith is in the end a passive trusting, an accepting of God's words as the facts of the matter. Do we like Abraham try to bargain, to help God along?
- c. We must in the end trust his word and abandon human security. Is that where you have failed? You can get back. Look at how slowly Abraham came to grips with the promises of God.

Life may have all sorts of failures, and does. But the call of God is the only starting point, the only way forward. And we are called to this adventure.

Does your life begin to have these qualities? I am not saying that you have to leave everything. Who knows? Perhaps we will. I know that we must be parted from its hold inside. And I know that the only way to real security is this strange way of God.

Come then on this pathway. None of us are experts. Each of us is so cautious, so reluctant. Like Abraham we look for backstops, for insurance. But God keeps nudging us towards that life of faith which is life indeed.