

The Promise of Isaac

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 18th June 2023 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Genesis 18:1-15. 21:1-7

Year A, Proper 6

Abraham, the man of faith

Last week we were introduced to Abraham, the father of the three Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The book of Genesis tells us of God's call to Abraham to leave behind his home and wider family and travel to the Promised Land, with a promise to make a great nation out of him, bless him, and bless the world through him. And Abraham sets out for Canaan, with his wife Sarah, nephew Lot and a contingent of servants, slaves, herdsmen and livestock. Abraham hears God, trusts God and obeys God. And on arrival in Canaan, God promises that he will give the land to Abraham's descendants.

I wonder if you have compared Abraham's story with your own? How easy have you found it to turn to God and ask him to guide you in the big decisions you have made in your life? If you've heard God prompting you to do something, have you obeyed him? When the future seemed uncertain, did you trust him to guide you through?

Abraham's story has started well. But we still have a little problem, because we're told that Sarah was infertile – so where are the descendants that God has promised going to

come from? Moreover, life is not without its challenges. Soon the group face famine, and go down to Egypt, where Abraham foolishly passes Sarah off as his sister, afraid that the Egyptians will see how beautiful she is, kill him and take her. Sure enough, Sarah is spotted, and taken to Pharaoh's harem. But when sickness afflicts Pharaoh's household, he realises that all is not well, returns Sarah to Abraham and sends him out of the country. You might ask, what was Abraham thinking of?

In chapter 13, Abraham and Lot part, as they by now have too many sheep and goats to stay in the same place. Lot chooses the Jordan valley, and settles near Sodom, a place renowned for its wickedness. God re-affirms his promise to Abraham to give him the land. In chapter 14 Abraham has to rescue Lot and his family who are taken captive by a group of raiding chieftains, and meets Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem (later known as Jerusalem).

In chapter 15 Abraham asks how God is going to fulfil his promise when Abraham is childless, and God reaffirms his promise to give him a child, telling him that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars of the sky. Abraham believes God, and the Lord "counts it to him as righteousness" (a very significant phrase for St Paul, centuries later).

But as time goes on, there's still no child, in spite of God's promise. Does that ring bells for you? You've trusted God for something important and you're still waiting. Sarah perhaps feels a failure – she's Abraham's wife, but she can't have children. So she comes up with another a plan – they

need a surrogate mother, and she has a young servant woman (maybe slave) who might just be the answer to their prayers. Abraham obliges, and has sex with Sarah's servant Hagar, who becomes pregnant. The plan nearly ends in tears, as the pregnant Hagar now disrespects Sarah, who in turn mistreats her, resulting in Hagar running away. It takes the intervention of an angel to bring Hagar back to the family, where Ishmael is born. Are we now back on track for God's purposes to be fulfilled?

Thirteen years now pass before Abraham has another communication from God, this time instructing him to be circumcised, and to make sure all the males of his household are circumcised, as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham's family.

This brings us to today's reading from chapter 18. As the chapter begins, it's early afternoon and Abraham is sitting at the door of his tent, shaded from the heat of the day. He looks up and sees three men standing outside. Being hospitable to strangers is important in that culture, but Abraham excels in his welcome to the three. Addressing the one who seems to be the senior person, he says "My lord, if I have found favour in your sight, do not pass by your servant." In other words, "I would be honoured if you would stop here." He offers them water to wash their feet, a traditional custom, and "a morsel of bread". Then he goes to prepare the best lunch he can rustle up, telling Sarah to make some bread and a servant to kill and cook the best calf for the guests. This must have taken a couple of hours, but in that culture no one had watches, and people were used to

waiting. Abraham stands and watches them eat rather than eating with them – a sign that he considers them of higher social standing than he is. We wonder, has Abraham suspected who the guests are?

Then the men ask, “Where is Sarah, your wife?”. How do these strangers know the name of Abraham’s wife? We, the listeners know, because the narrator has told us at the beginning of the chapter that one of the three guests is the LORD – the other two, we discover later, are angels. We don’t know whether Abraham has twigged who the guests are. But if he hasn’t, there’s a surprise coming.

You might be wondering by now why Sarah is still in the tent, hidden from view. But in that patriarchal culture, the women would keep in the background when male guests were being entertained. Similarly, it would not be considered normal for a male guest to speak to the host’s wife, unless she had been specifically introduced. So Sarah is listening inside the tent while the men are talking outside. She hears the chief guest say that in a year she will have a son. Sarah thinks no one can hear her, as she bursts out laughing. She’s far too old to have a child, and after all, nothing has happened in the last 25 years since they arrived in Canaan.

The LORD knows what she’s thinking as he says “Is anything too hard for the LORD?” And he reiterates his promise, that in a year’s time Sarah will have a son. Then in chapter 21 we see this promise being fulfilled, and Sarah is laughing for the right reason now, as she becomes a mother at the age of

ninety. And the name of the child? Isaac, which means “he laughs”.

We have seen that Abraham is a man of faith – even a model of faith, who is celebrated in the New Testament by Jesus, Paul, James and the writer of the letter to the Hebrews. He’s also later described as the “friend of God”. But God makes him wait a long time before the promised son is born. Abraham trusts God – but ten years after leaving Haran he and Sarah feel that they need to take the matter into their own hands, using Hagar as a surrogate. Do you sometimes get fed up waiting for God to answer your prayers, and decide to fix things your own way?

In today’s reading we are reminded that nothing is too difficult for the LORD. But how God gets his plans to work is a bit of a mystery to us humble mortals. There’s a headstone in our churchyard, remembering Brian James Bull, who was a pilot of the supersonic aircraft Concorde, and died at the age of 41. I don’t know his story, but the words on his stone I think sum up our inability to understand the ways of God. It reads:

“God only knows, God makes his plan,
This information is unavailable to the mortal man.”

What we do know from Abraham’s story, however, is that God makes it all come right in the end. Isaac, the child of the promise, is born, and God’s purposes will be fulfilled.

You might like to know that there’s another version of the story about the promise of Isaac, which you can find in chapter 17. It seems to have come from a different source,

as a different word is used for God than the one used in chapter 18. In this version, when God has finished telling Abraham to circumcise all his males, he goes on to say that Sarah, who is now 90 years old, will have a son. Abraham literally falls over laughing – not perhaps the most respectful way to respond to the Almighty. “You can’t be serious”, he says to God. “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?”¹ He thought he’d got it all sorted through Hagar’s son Ishmael. No, says God, the laugh’s on you. One year from now, Sarah will give birth. And you’re to name the child Isaac, which means “he laughs”.

We may not always experience the ups and downs, the complexities and uncertainties of life as a bundle of laughs. But the story of Abraham’s relationship with God encourages us to trust that however inscrutable the ways of the Almighty, God will in the end bring about his good purposes for us and for the world.

¹ Genesis 17:17 ESV