

## Sermon - Reckoned to us who believe

*Based on Genesis 17.1-7, 15-16, Romans 4.13-25 and Mark 8.31-38 (NRSV)*

### God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah

- Today we hear about the covenant God makes with Abraham and Sarah, for which Paul provides some commentary.
- And then we hear Jesus telling us to deny ourselves, take up our respective crosses, and follow him.
- Let us see if there might be some connection between these readings, or perhaps see if the first readings help to inform our understanding of the Gospel.
  
- The first reading from Genesis is reasonably straightforward, but nevertheless remarkable in what it says about the depth of Abraham's faith relationship with God.
- Let me remind you of the events before this moment.
- Last week we heard of God making a covenant with Noah after the flood.
- Noah's family then multiplies, eventually spreading abroad on the earth.
- There is the event when people decide to build a tower to the heavens - the tower of Babel - and then the building cannot be completed because of the differences between the babel - or the babble - of languages.
- In the list of descendants of Noah and his son Shem, there is a man called Terah who decides to move to Canaan with his son Abram, daughter-in-law Sarai, and grandson Lot - but only gets part way when he decides to settle where he is.
- God apparently calls Abram to complete the journey to Canaan, and off he goes with his wife Sarai and nephew Lot.
- After various adventures, during which Abram comprehends God as guiding and providing for him, we come to the interaction between God and Abram described in today's reading.
- God blesses Abram and makes a covenant with him, promising that his descendants will form many nations.
- Although the speaking of covenant appears to be only with Abram, Sarai is also implicated in it.
- Obviously in that it is through her child Isaac that this multitude of descendants is to be effected - but also because the covenant is marked with a name change not only for Abram, but for Sarai as well.
- That Abram is renamed Abraham and Sarai is renamed Sarah is an indication of the significance of this covenant.
- It also makes the reality of the covenant tangible for the couple.
- This is similar to someone changing their surname when they become married - it's an indication that they have entered into a covenanted relationship: the changed name is an outward sign of a changed inner reality.

### Paul praises Abraham's faith

- Now Paul, in his letter to the church in Rome, makes an interesting comment about the faith of Abraham in contrast to the law of God.
- We need to remember that the law was only formally given to Moses hundreds of years later, after the descendants of Abraham's grandson Jacob had become the Israelite people, freed from slavery in Egypt.
- So Paul points out that Abraham could not possibly have been chosen by God for this covenant of blessing due to having complied with the formal law of God - because at the time that God made this covenant, the law had not yet been formally given.

## Sermon - Reckoned to us who believe

- So Paul says:

*For this reason [the promise that he would inherit the world] depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants (Romans 4.16)*

- Paul goes on about how God's promise of life is shown not to be dependent on being obedient to God's law, but rather on God's grace given in response to our faithfulness in him.
- As Paul says:

*No distrust made [Abraham] waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. (Romans 4.20-21)*

### God gives life to the dead

- Paul emphasises an aspect that is not mentioned in today's reading from Genesis, and that is that both Abraham and Sarah were old - at least, old enough for Sarah to be considered past the age of child-bearing.
- In this sense they were metaphorically dead in that they were no longer able to procreate - to produce the next generation of life.
- Paul writes:

*[Abraham] did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. (Romans 4.19)*

- For Paul this is an important concept in the light of his understanding of what happened to Jesus.
- Paul refers to Christians, including us, as those 'who share the faith of Abraham', and he refers to God's action of giving 'life to the dead.'
- Listen to how he puts it:

*[So] that the promise [that is, the covenant given to Abraham] may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham [(us)]... —in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead (Romans 4.16-17)*

- Simply put, Paul reckons that God brought Abraham and Sarah metaphorically back to life - that is, they were able to make a baby after previously being unable to —... God brought them back to life because of Abraham's faith in God.
- Paul connects this with the death and resurrection of Jesus, because he writes about:

*[God] who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification. (Romans 4.24)*

- Paul suggests that our faith can be inspired by Abraham's faith, when he writes:

*[Abraham's] faith 'was reckoned to him as righteousness.' Now the words, 'it was reckoned to him', were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead (Romans 4.22-24)*

- Paul's rationale is that Abraham had faith that God would enable Abraham and Sarah to be life-bearing again, and that we can exercise the same faith, because we believe that God 'raised Jesus our Lord from the dead'.

### Peter tempts Jesus

- And this is the connection with today's Gospel passage, because this is where Jesus, for the first time in Mark's Gospel account, describes his forthcoming suffering, death *and* resurrection.
- Of course the disciples are aghast, and want to reject this completely.

## Sermon - Reckoned to us who believe

- I reckon they probably only registered the suffering and death part, and didn't even hear the bit about resurrection.
- Maybe if Peter had, he might have responded by saying 'No, no - what?! Resurrection? Wait a moment - run this past us again.'
- Jesus nevertheless tries to explain what this is fundamentally about.
- And he makes this about both those first disciples, and about us as his disciples in this time and place.
- He says anyone who wants to follow him - to learn from him to be a Christian disciple - then you need to put your own desire to one side, and focus on God's desire.
- This is exactly what Jesus himself practices - he puts his own desires for himself to one side, so that he can be obedient to God.
- And Peter effectively tempts Jesus, by saying, in effect, 'No, no - you mustn't do that, don't even consider allowing yourself to suffer and be put to death.'
- For Jesus this is a very real temptation, because it's said by Peter, who is close to and cares about him.
- And Jesus has to push back against Peter, and says, I think as much for his own sake as anyone else's: 'Get behind me, Satan!', because it is indeed so tempting, and so he needs to reaffirm for himself that Peter's rejection of Jesus' path is not in accordance with God's desire.

### Give priority to God's desire

- So Jesus makes it clear that what he is about, and what we need to be about too, if we are serious about being Christians, is to put our own human desires aside and focus on the Divine desire.
- And the Divine desire is simply this: sacrificial love.
- Sacrificial love is wanting others to be blessed, and acting on that, even when it is costly to ourselves.
- If we put our own desires first, then we lose out on the blessing of life connected with God.
- But if we put God's desire first, even to our own cost, then we gain the blessing of life connected with God.
- Paul, in his writings, reckons that just as Abraham gave priority to his faith relationship with God, and God thereby gave him the blessing of life, so too if we each give priority to our faith relationship with God, God will give us the blessing of life in connection with him.
- The season of Lent encourages each of us to reflect on our own faith relationship with God, to see where we are giving priority to our own desires rather than to God's desire.
- We can learn from our teacher, Jesus, not to give in to that temptation, and prioritise the way of Jesus, the way of sacrificial love.
- And Jesus promises that when we do this, we are then blessed in our closer faith relationship with God.