

Ancient Patterns for Newfangled Times: God's Dealings with Abraham & Sarah

Genesis 12.1-8 | Romans 4.1-3, 18-25 | Matthew 16.24-28

- I want today to make 4 basic points about the Abraham and Sarah story, of Genesis 12-25. Too short! I'll presume a certain familiarity with the story...
- My four points are:
 1. Scandal of Particularity: In the Mission of God, God partners with people one at a time
 2. Promise & Risky Faith: Faith is about responding to God's promise and therefore always involves an element of risk
 3. Testing & Mercy: God's mercy is not extinguished when we don't meet the test
 4. Blessing: We become agents of God's blessing when we stay faithful to the vision of the promise and are prepared to pay the price
- Years ago, when I did my English degree, I did a few courses in Middle English, but only one in Old English
- Old English, if you don't know, is a gutsy, Norse-Germanic kind of English. It existed before 1066, when French influence corrupted the pure Teutonic glory of English with a lot of dainty "oo la las" and "bon soirs"
- A modern English speaker can pick up a Middle English text and get some of it
- But when you pick up an Old English text, you can't.
- What's true of the language is true of the worldview, too.

- Our lecturer used to say that reading Middle English was like looking in a mirror
- But reading Old English is like looking through a window, into a different world
- I feel that a bit about Genesis
- Until this week, we've been looking at Chapters 1-11 and it's broadbrush prehistory is like looking into a different world
- But from Genesis 12 onwards, the nature of the text changes. When Sarah and Abraham talk, we see into a mirror.
- We can identify with their responses and their aspirations. When they act, we can see something of ourselves in their motivations. Like us, they are mixed up human beings; capable of generosity and heroism; capable of pettiness and deceit.
- However, tying the story together: **the same God** who works in the **same way**.
- Throughout Genesis, God is revealed to be an originating, creative power
- In Chapters 1-11, as in 12-50, God is revealed as merciful in the face of human wickedness. God works with selected individuals to bring blessing to creation.
- I'm plagiarising freely from the Bible Project today, and they note how this pattern of creation mercy and new starts with one or two people recurs in Genesis 1-11, and then on into the story of Abraham and Sarah and beyond
- So, in Genesis 1-3, God the Creator brings this world of rich diversity and creativity into being. In it, he plants a garden refuge on a

mountain, *centred around a special tree*. And he places in the garden a pair of humans who are charged with cultivating the garden, and bringing blessing to the world from it in partnership with him. But the humans decline God's invitation; they rebel and send the world into a spiral of deceit and violence.

- So God in his creative mercy **starts again**; he wipes the world clean in the Flood, and on top of a sacred mountain he commissions a *new pair*, Noah and his wife, to bring blessing to the world. But Noah, in a garden again, gets drunk, and reintroduces the spiral of selfishness.
- That spiral culminates in the self-aggrandising tower of Babel that we heard about last week. Among other things, Babel represents the human desire to achieve sacredness on our own terms; to make a name for ourselves, rather than receiving an identity from the One who created us.
- And, out of creative mercy God **starts again**. He scatters the project of human pride, and again in his mercy he chooses another human pair, Abraham and Sarah, to work through with to bring blessing to the world.
- Notice how they take part in the same pattern
- As with A&E, as with Noah, God commissions A & S for the task of sharing God's blessing with the world. And he commissions them on high places, underneath special trees, with a choice that re-presents the choice of A&E in Chapter 2-3.
- I won't go through it all, but you can trace for yourself how at crucial moments, Abraham and Sarah, under significant trees, choose or choose not to cooperate in the task of partnering with God's work in the world.
 - The great tree of Moreh (12.6) (great nation)
 - Near great trees or oaks of Mamre

§ (13.18), God promises the land, offspring as dust of the earth

§ 14.13, 15.1-6 the promises confirmed in a covenant,

§ 17.16 a separate promise to Sarah (17.16)

§ 18.1-10 Mamre again, the promise of the birth of Isaac

- The tamarisk tree at 21.33 to commemorate his covenant with Abimelech that starts to undo the scattering of Babel
- The thicket of 22.13 on Mt Moriah where Abraham obeys
- (Note also Moreh, Mamre, and Moriah, all mean vision or seeing)

- What's so special about these events happening by special trees?
- It indicates that Abraham and Sarah's choice is in many ways a re-presentation of Adam & Eve's choice. Will Abraham & Sarah trust God for his promises to bless all people through their descendants?
- It also highlights that God works with people, one by one, and always has.
- For the most part, scandalous though it seems, God deals with particular people, not in generalities
- God has unique work for each one of us to do in partnering with him.
- So in some sense, the choice of A&E to choose to trust God, of A&S to trust the promises of God, are archetypal choices –choices you and I also have to make, in our daily experience.

- —Are we going to choose to trust God's work through us? Will we accept his call to bless others, in all the spheres of life where he leads us?
- Second point is about Faith. Faith is always a risky response to promise of God.
- Scripture holds Abraham up as an archetype of faith, as in our Romans reading. Why? Because he responds to God's promise by putting his life on the line and his future on the line, in risky ways
- In Chapter 12. The LORD tells Abraham to leave his country, his people, his household. And even though Abraham hardly knows this God, he goes.
- In Chapter 15, God tells Abraham, who with Sarah is unable after years of marriage to have children, that their descendants will be like the stars of the sky. And Abraham believes him.
- In both cases, Abraham's trust is costly. Costly in terms of relationship and riches with the people and possessions left behind. Costly in terms of reputation – why trust your future and your family tree to this scarcely known God whom no one else follows, whose voice you might have made up?
- Yet, he does it. He takes the risk, and this faith is credited to him as righteousness.
- Paul hammers home in Romans and Galatians that this kind of faith is the archetype for our faith. Abe calls out from us a willingness to respond to Jesus's promise by putting our lives on the line for him.
- So, what things does Jesus promise? I think of Matthew 28. Jesus promises to be with us always, even to the end of the age, *as we seek to make disciples for his kingdom.*
- Often, we act as if faith in Jesus is a mental process. I believe in Jesus; I invite him into my life, identify as a Christian, and go on with my life.

- But that's hardly the way Paul lived, as he sought to make disciples for the kingdom. Trusting in Jesus' promise cost him: shipwrecks and lashes and sleepless nights.
 - And it's not the way Abraham and Sarah lived, either. They didn't just mentally assent to cross the desert, and stay put. They crossed the desert.
 - Faith in God's promise is by definition risky. It cost Paul, and Abraham and Sarah, materially and reputationally and relationally, as they followed the seemingly impossible promises of this elusive God.
 - Not one of you can be by disciple, unless you take up your cross and follow...
- So... How's the stepping out dimension in our faith, collectively, and personally? How do you and I have skin in the game, in the walk of faith?
- Collectively, I mentioned a couple of months ago the thought that at some point, God might be calling us to share what we have as St Michael's to bless other parishes around us in their mission. That seems to have struck a chord with some of you; and one or two of you have shared with me a sense in prayer that God is promising good things if we put flesh on those promises and take some risks there.
 - That also has implications for our earthquake project. That's going to involve a fair of bit of risky faith. And when it comes to fundraising, it's tempting for the vicar to hoard all the tithing people we can, not send them off to Northland or Wadestown, coz any building project is going to involve impossible sums of money. But since it's God whose promise is involved here, hoarding is not the way
- What about individually? What sense do you have of God's leading, quietly welling up in you, or maybe thumping loudly against your heart like a knock you can't ignore? Maybe someone God is asking you to talk to? Something you want to start or stop? A move God is nudging you to make?

- I remember hearing a sermon years ago on taking calculated risks for God; it prompted me to go home, and write a PhD scholarship application inside 24 hours and post it to Glasgow inside a week. That changed my life.
- =—And I need to keep trusting and listening – trusting God for these obedient steps that mean everything.
- A footnote to this. It's clear from the text that there are times Abraham's faith wanes, and there are times Sarah's faith does. You'll recall that at different times they both greet God's promise with incredulous laughter (17.17, 18.12).
- But - they carry each other through. There's one point where Abraham is really troubled by the difficulty they've got themselves into with Hagar and Ishmael, and God says to him; don't be distressed; do what *Sarah* tells you (21.12).
- Maybe this is you.
- Sometimes what faith asks seems too much to bear. May we take more steps to carry each other's faith when we're in this space, to pray with one another about what feels impossible, to encourage each other, to share prophetically the hopes God has placed in our hearts.
- So, what feels too hard for you to have faith for today? Why not ask someone else to pray with you, to let them hold faith for this, for you.
- Third thing: concerns testing and mercy. I've said that Abraham and Sarah have a choice that in many ways repeats the test of Adam & Eve.
- The text tells us that they pass the test. That's evident in the mysterious story of Chapter 22, the near-sacrifice of Isaac. But, to be honest, it's a C+ pass at best. They are not paragons of piety.
- You might recall that Abraham *twice* practises a shocking ruse to pass Sarah off as his sister to save his skin, not caring what happens

to her. Then there's the laughter at God's promise that Sarah will conceive I mentioned (17.17).

- And then when God's promise isn't coming to pass, there's the exploitative plan they hatch to have Abraham sleep with Hagar, so that he can at least have a shot at being the father of many nations his own way. That involves all sorts of cruelty and causes all sorts of complications.
- But, through it all, God is faithful to his promises. And merciful, beautifully merciful to Hagar and her son Ishmael.
- Ultimately, it's God's promise that matters, not the quality of people God chooses.
- How does this make you feel? Take a pause for a moment to reflect on this. Can you trust that God's promises are sure even when they are met by our doubts, our frailty and fickleness?
- The fourth one. How does God bless the world through Abraham and Sarah? At one level, this is about the extraordinary and enduring impact Abraham's family has had on the world, both the descendants of Isaac, the Jewish people, and also in God's mercy, the children of Ishmael.
- Watching the movie Oppenheimer, I was struck again by the Jewish influence on the world, in its scientists obviously there, but also Jewish philosophers, artists, musicians, writers, philanthropists and so on.
- But that great influence starts with small acts of generosity. The Bible Project people point to an easily overlooked story in Ch 21, under the tamarisk tree, as an indication of how blessing works out in practice. Abraham is approached by Abimelech, a "king", more probably a kind of local warlord.
- Abimelech has seen in the proceeding chapters that God has been with Abraham. So he wants a piece of God's protection. He comes to

Abraham to propose a covenant with him, to get in on Abraham's blessing, even though he's not one of God's people.

- Abraham agrees. And then a curious little episode follows, where he has to demonstrate the generous cost of what belonging to God's people means
- Abraham buys back a well, which he himself has dug, for the generous price of 7 lambs. The Bible Project guys point to the way that Abraham is faithful to the mutual kindness of his covenant with Abimelech, acting generously at cost to himself. In the process he represents God by living out the generosity with which God has dealt with him. Being a blessing often comes at a cost.
- But notice, in the process, Abraham is involved in overturning the curse of Babel. Where Babel scatters the nations, Abraham here, under a sacred tree, is involved in an initial act of reuniting the nations, fulfilling his role of blessing.
- And of course, that reaches a culmination in Jesus. Jesus is one of Abraham's descendants as Matthew's gospel highlights. And as Paul tells us in Romans 4, Jesus demonstrates supremely how God's blessing comes to a climax through his faithfulness and costly love. He pays the ultimate price of his own life in order to reunite the nations into God's family. "He was delivered over to death for our sins, and was raised to life for our justification".

So let's pray. God our faith is small, the size of a mustard seed at best. We are C+ Christians on our good days. But you tell us that's enough as we put out trust in you, and let you work...