

Sermon 16th July 2017 - Isaac and Rebekah

Prayer: Lord as I speak this morning, may your Spirit be active in our hearts so we grow in the grace and knowledge of you, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

There are few tasks in life I like less than trying to untangle a ball of string, or pulling a comb through my hair when it's in a tangle!! And I feel a bit like that this morning as I come to our three scriptures this morning – what is it that links them, and what is God wanting us to understand and hear through them on a morning where (in the 9.30 service) we also have the adult baptism of Sophia??

At one level perhaps the linkage is marriage, but I suspect there is more – so let's explore a bit together and see what we can find. In exploring any scripture I think it is worth starting from the question "What is God revealing about Himself through this story?" God longs for us to be in an ever deeper relationship with Him, and the stories, even the commands, are rarely "Do it like this and all will be fine" – they are much more likely to be intended to reveal something of God's character, and to challenge us to respond to that!

So, let's start with the story of the servant being sent out to find a wife for Isaac. We joined the story part way through, so let me backtrack a little. Abram has heard God's voice calling him to travel to a foreign land, and then has heard God promise to make him a father of nations, and one nation in particular. In old age he and his wife Sarah get the promise they will have a son, and with Abraham aged 100 years old, and Sarah at 90, their son Isaac is born – no wonder they called him laughter! Now aged about 140 Abraham calls his chief servant and commands him on solemn oath to go and find a wife for Isaac –not one from the local Canaanite tribes, but one from their own tribe. Isaac meanwhile was to remain in the land promised to him.

Even as we start the reading therefore, we see Abraham absolutely trusting in God to provide. He commands his servant to trust in God's nature and to go on the journey. Our reading picks up the tale half way through, as the servant relates to Laban, Abraham's uncle, how he has prayed for that the Lord will show Hesed, which our translation gave as

“kindness”, to his mission as he has to his master Abraham, and how Rebekah has come in answer to that prayer. He finishes his recounting of the tale to Laban with a challenge: “Now, if you will show ‘Hesed’ to my master, tell me; and if not, tell me, so I may know which way to turn”.

There’s a really important lesson in here. The servant has seen in his master Abraham’s life a quality of God – this ‘Hesed’. In English we translate this as kindness, but this is too gentle: Hesed is surprising, overflowing, totally ridiculous, generosity and love – kindness which is entirely unmerited or deserved! Hesed is a quality that moves someone to act for the benefit of someone else without considering "what's in it for me?" The servant has called on God to show this quality to him by bringing the right girl to the right place at the right time. And now he is challenging Laban to show the same unmerited generosity in sending his daughter to become Isaac’s wife – “Will you do as God has done?” is the challenge.

The success of this whole mission depends on recognising, and showing, God’s Hesed! And of course that is the challenge to Rebekah too – ultimately she is faced with a simple choice – she has seen God’s hand at work in the commission to the servant, in his response and prayer to God to reveal more of his Hesed, in her father’s response in reflecting this kindness in agreeing in principle. Now she must make her own decision on how to respond. Her response is just three words – three words which will change her life for ever – “I will go!”

We have just been witness to the baptism of Sophia. We have talked of the qualities of our God, we have shared some of our mission, and we have asked for a simple response – the equivalent of “I will go” – words that will change life forever.

I will return to that – first I want just briefly to touch on our other two readings, each of which similarly shows us something of God’s nature.

Let’s start in Song of Songs – a passage often used at weddings – a passage loaded with intimacy, and passion!! The book is a love story between “the Beloved” and “She”, and can be read just as that. But it is more – it is the love story between God (the Beloved) and mankind, the ‘She’. It is the story of God’s pursuit of us – his longing for us!! It is also prophetic. Although written by Solomon, it foretells the time when the kingdom of God is among men – the time ushered in by Jesus. ‘My beloved spoke and said to me, “Arise, my

darling, my beautiful one, come with me. See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth...”.

Jesus is quite clear in all the gospel accounts “The Kingdom of God is here...” Heaven is not some distant home in the stars for when he winds up everything – we are called to live as members of His kingdom now. And in this kingdom God is like a mighty stag on the rugged hills – full of vitality and health, handsome and alert.

Once again we see qualities of God that attract and we admire – and just as “She” does in the Song of Songs, our hearts want to follow...

And what of the Gospel passage – what does this show us about God? Again, let’s unpack a little. Jesus is slowly making his way from the northern kingdoms towards Jerusalem. He’s already regarded by the Jewish authorities (ie the church of his day) as a subversive threat. The subject of marriage and unilateral divorce was a topical hot potato (no change there then!), and to cap it all he’s probably in the territory of Herod Antipas whose recent divorce had drawn the fire of John the Baptist with fairly disastrous results! So what better subject to catch Jesus out, either by him denying the sanctity of marriage, or by contradicting Moses teaching which had allowed divorce in a very limited set of circumstances?

I don’t want to divert us into a long discussion about the response, and Jesus teaching about marriage, but rather to point to the way he answered the question. He takes us back to God’s original intention for marriage, quoting the passage from Genesis, and then points out that in Moses teaching he permitted divorce under certain circumstances because he recognised that mankind was incapable of fully living the original plan. He pointed both to the intimacy and faithfulness God intended for marriage, and to God’s ‘Hesed’, the undeserved kindness, that sat behind God’s care in giving the law.

So having pulled at our “ball of wool” a bit, do we have some strands appearing that will start to form a single thread? I think we might, and I’d like to suggest it is this: Realise we are citizens of a new kingdom – God’s kingdom here on earth, and live with full allegiance to the kingdom. To do so we need to reflect on the true nature of God, and then bear witness to this through every aspect of our lives.

Abraham’s servant recognised in Abraham’s life the fact that Abraham was the start of a new chapter of God’s relationship with mankind – he was literally living as the founder of a

new nation under God in a foreign and alien land. Abraham's life, and the promise to him that he would be the father of nations, spoke of God's 'Hesed', his benevolence, his kindness. In taking on the task of finding the wife for Isaac the servant the servant asked that God's Hesed be present in his interaction with Laban, and indeed that Laban would show Hesed in his response. Seeing this, without I would suggest really understanding the significance at the time, Rebekah's powerful words "I will go" are the ultimate response for each of us.

The Song of Songs passage speaks of God's ebullience, his passion, his longing to be intimately involved in our lives. The Matthew passage reaffirms God's intent that we should live with our closest companion reflecting God's qualities of intimacy and faithfulness.

They all point firstly to us Knowing God and his qualities and character, and then our response being to show these in our lives, living as citizens of a new Kingdom.

We have just collectively borne witness as Sophia came to that point of decision – to the place where she renounced her old allegiance to the ways of the world and declared her commitment to be a citizen of God's Kingdom, to shape her life to reflect God's character; it was her time to declare: "I will go!" As she has done so, let us pray for her, and indeed for ourselves, in the words of Peter's second letter, that she may: "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ".

Does that mean it will all be plain sailing from there on?? Of course not. Rebekah, the beautiful bride we have been learning about goes on to become the scheming mother of Esau and Jacob, a mother whose actions ultimately set brother against brother the ramifications of which still resonate through the world! Similarly Jesus reflects in his teaching on divorce that God knows, and indeed allows for, our failure to live out his character and plans.

And God doesn't leave us alone to struggle on – at the moment of baptism, at the moment we say "I will go", he puts within our hearts the Holy Spirit – that person of God who can fully reflect God's nature. Each of us here who has been baptised, or who has in our own way sworn our allegiance to God's kingdom, has that seed of the spirit within us – the seed that yields the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

But as I close I would ask you to reflect on just three qualities of God: His 'Hesed', His 'Intimacy', and His 'Faithfulness'. We will reflect in silence and I will prompt from time to time to lead us forward. At the end John/George will lead us on in intercession to our ever loving Father.

So let us still our minds and focus wholly on God's 'Hesed' – His overflowing, totally ridiculous, generosity and love – kindness which is entirely unmerited or deserved!

(30 secs)

What are your reactions to this Hesed? Surprise? Fear? Excitement? Relish these feelings – be aware of them hear them as your soul's response to God's Hesed

(30 secs)

Let us move on to God's Intimacy. "Look! Here he comes, leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look! There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice."

(30 secs)

What is your reaction to God's longing to be so close? Embarrassment? Vulnerability? Or is it security and comfort?

(30 secs)

And what about God's faithfulness? His constancy of purpose, his unswerving determination to reach out and embrace us?

(30 secs)

Let us dwell on God's Faithfulness? His call that we are faithful to his kingdom, unswerving and determined? A call that demands a response. Fear? Repentance? Humility? Joy?

(30 secs)

As John/George now leads us in intercession to the Father, let our hearts be alive to the presence of the Holy Spirit within us.