

Sermon given on 7th June 2020 at St Michael's church Sandhurst. The readings are: Genesis chapter 12 verses 1 to 9 and Matthew 9 verses 9 to 13.

This is the first sermon in a series of 4 sermons on "The adventures of Abraham." and this one is entitled, "The call to Abraham." But before I delve into our reading, I'm going to give a brief history by way of an introduction.

Abraham was originally known as Abram, and his wife Sarah was originally known as Sarai, and I shall be using their original names from now on. Abram was born around 2200 BC and his father was Terah who had 3 sons, Abram, Nahor and Haran, and they may well have been born in Ur, which was at the top end of the Persian Gulf in what is now Iraq.

And the name Haran was not only the name of his third son it was also the name of the place where Terah took his family to live. Haran still exists as a small village in Turkey near the Turkish Syrian border. Haran was the father of Lot who we hear a good deal about in the Genesis story, but Haran, Lot's father, died in Ur before they left to go to Canaan by way of Haran, however, they didn't finish the journey because they stopped off and made their home at Haran, by then they had journeyed about 600 miles north west.

Abram married Sarai before moving to Haran so Ur would have been considered their hometown. It was Terah who took Abram, Sarai and Lot to Haran where they settled, and it was at Haran that Abram's father Terah died, after Abram had left to go on his journey South.

Now in 2000 years BC the only protection a person had was his extended family, and his extended family may have consisted of all generations, from great grandparents down to one's own family, and in those days probably slaves as well, who were also members of the extended family, in other words lots of people. All these people were the family's protection not only against outside aggression, but also against illness, accidents, or hardship. Family groups in those days were, by necessity, very close and supportive of each other.

We now come to a great turning point in human history as portrayed in the book of Genesis, and it came about by God choosing one man, whom he could work with and through, to create a more formal relationship with all his people on earth, and that one man was Abram.

Abram was the first and the greatest of the patriarchs, and it is at the beginning of chapter 12 of Genesis that his story really begins. So, turning now to our reading, chapter 12 verse 1 reads, “Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country, (that is Haran), and from your kindred and from your father’s house and go to the land that I will show you.’”

God was telling Abram, at the age of 75, to leave the protection of his extended family and to rely only on God for his protection, for Abram, and indeed for anyone in the Middle East at that time, that was a huge step to take, and certainly not one to be taken lightly. However, he did obey God, and although God hadn’t told him where he was going, he still packed all their things in readiness for the journey.

Turning now to Abram’s faith, I struggled for a long time with the concept that Abram at the age of 75 suddenly, after hearing God’s voice for the very first time say “Go”, was so immediately obedient. My struggle was of course my lack of faith that with God all things are possible. But now, having thought about it for some time I am convinced that this was Abram’s first encounter with God. Also, we heard in Matthew’s gospel at verse 9, that when Matthew and Jesus met for the first time that Jesus said to Matthew, “Come follow me.” And he obeyed without question. So, when God spoke to Abram for the first time by telling him to, “Go”. Then, like Matthew, this was his moment of divine obedience. Indeed, both Abram and Matthew’s reaction to God’s call had proved their suitability for the life changing tasks that God had prepared for them.

It was Abram’s faith in God that set him apart from all other men. It was also at this point in Abram’s life that Abram first shows his unquestioning obedience to God, and as I’ve already indicated it wasn’t a small thing that he was about to do. So Abram not only shows great faith in God he also demonstrates great courage.

Verse 2 tells us that Abram’s reward for his extraordinary obedience, was that God promised that he would make him a great nation.” Now near the end of the previous chapter 11 at verse 30 we read, “Now Sarai was barren; she had no child.” From that verse we can conclude that they had tried many times for a baby but that it didn’t happen. However, for God’s promise to Abram in verse 2 that he would become a great nation, Abram had to have at least one son.

So, although God's promise would take many generations to achieve, long after Abram and Sarai had died, nevertheless, the start of the promise would be evident to Abram in his lifetime, because not only is Sarai barren and beyond normal childbearing age, she will nevertheless have a son, so Abram will see the start of God's promise and the start of his great nation in his son.

And God added, "And I will bless you. And make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." Of course, a son would now be a blessing to Abram, indeed, it would be a blessing beyond his wildest dreams, as for making his name great, God certainly achieved that, because 4000 years later possibly more than half the world's population have not only heard of Abraham, as he is now called, but hold Abraham's name in great esteem and reverence.

Verse 3 is quite clear in that those who bless Abram will themselves be blessed; whereas those who curse him, or hold him in contempt, God will curse.

Verse 4 tells us that Abram went as the Lord had told him and Lot went with them, and we are told that Abram was 75 years old when he set off for Canaan.

In verse 5 we are told that Abram took his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot, all their belongings and the persons, who were probably slaves that Abram had acquired in Haran, and they set forth to the land of Canaan, which would be roughly south, and when they reached Shechem they would have travelled a further 400 miles. But Abram passed through Shechem to the nearby oak tree at Moreh, and it was at Moreh that the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So Abram built an altar to the Lord there, because God had appeared to him there.

Now this oak tree became quite famous. In Genesis 35 verse 4 we are told that Jacob took his extended family to the oak and there made everyone give him all their rings and images of foreign gods and he buried them there. In the book of Joshua at chapter 26 we are told that Joshua made a covenant with the people, and he sealed it by laying a large stone under the oak in the sanctuary of the Lord. And in Judges chapter 9 verse 6 we read that the lords of Shechem made Abimelech king, by the Oak at Shechem.

Abram had journeyed about 1200 miles since leaving Ur. From there he journeyed south about 30 miles to the east of Bethel, between Bethel and Ai about 15 miles from the Jordan river. It was here he pitched his tent and built an altar to the Lord where he prayed to the Lord.

In our last verse 9 we read that Abram journeyed on in stages to the Negeb a journey of a further 100 miles south, but while this is the end of our journey with Abram today, his journey continued.

As for Abram's spiritual journey, that started at Haran when God said to Abram "Go" and he immediately obeyed, and his story of faith continued and did not finish there, because that was not the end of his Spiritual journey, not at all, I am sure that throughout the next 3 sermons on Abram's journey of faith we will hear of his triumphs and of his failures, because like all of us he was human. But undoubtedly Abram's faith came alive at Haran when his faith in God gave him extraordinary courage to obey God without question.

May faith in God uphold us, may the hope of God reach out to us, and may the love of God surround us.

Amen