

A sermon given on Sunday 14th June 2020 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Reading: Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7
(part 2 of series of 5 sermons on Abraham)

Introduction: Quick quiz

During this Covid lockdown a lot of people have been using quizzes as a means of entertainment and a shared activity on Zoom or other electronic media. So here are 5 Religious Knowledge questions to tax your brain for a few moments.

1. Name a character who is venerated by members of 3 world religions, making up more than 50% of the world's population.
2. To which biblical character do both Arabs and Jews trace their ancestry?
3. Which OT character twice claimed that his wife was his sister?
4. Which OT character took 318 trained men and defeated 4 kings in battle?
5. Which Old Testament character is mentioned 71 times in the New Testament?

Now for the answers. Or, should I say, answer. The answer to all these questions is the subject of our sermon series: Abraham, known as the man of faith and the friend of God.

The story so far

Last week we heard about Abraham's calling by God to go to the land of Canaan, and of God's promise to make him a great nation and to bless all the world through him. John White talked about Abraham's obedience to God, and his trust in God that helped him to leave behind his family and what was familiar and strike out into the unknown.

That was in chapter 12 of Genesis, and a lot has happened in the intervening chapters, which I hope you'll take a few minutes to read in your own time. Here's a brief summary of chapters 12 to 17:

- Abraham and his wife Sarah go to Egypt to escape famine, and Sarah, who is by any standards a good-looking woman, is taken by Pharaoh to be a wife, until God intervenes to save her.
- God promises to give Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan.
- Abraham's nephew Lot settles in the city of Sodom, but is caught up in a war between 9 kings and taken hostage. Abraham rescues him and the other hostages, and meets Melchizedek, the mysterious priest-king of Salem, who blesses him.
- God reaffirms his covenant with Abraham through a ceremony of sacrificial animals, and warns that his descendants will spend many years as slaves.

- In spite of God's promise to Abraham that he will have many descendants, Sarah is still unable to conceive, and gives her slave-girl Hagar to Abraham as a second-tier wife. But when Hagar gets pregnant, she and Sarah fall out. Hagar runs away, but is met by an angel who tells her to go back home.
- God tells Abraham that he and all males in his household must be circumcised as a sign of the covenant between his family and God.

The three visitors

And that brings us to chapter 18, where 3 strangers turn up at Abraham's tent and Abraham eventually realises that they are God himself accompanied by 2 angels who are on a mission to investigate rumours of great wickedness in Sodom and its neighbouring towns. But Abraham doesn't realise who they are at the beginning.

Have you ever been on the receiving end of a kind act by a stranger? I don't know if you've ever listened to the magazine programme *Saturday Live* on Radio 4, but it's well worth listening to for one regular item, which is where listeners get in touch to talk about an act of kindness that they have received, often from a stranger whom they never got the chance to thank. You can listen to some of their remarkable stories by searching online for "Saturday Live Thank You"¹. How we behave towards strangers, where we stand to gain nothing from showing kindness or hospitality, is a true test of our character.

The story of Abraham's encounter with the 3 strangers in Genesis 18 shows Abraham's generosity. It is still very important in Middle Eastern culture to show both to show hospitality, and to accept it. Showing hospitality is a sign of respect. It also shows that you are a decent person.

I recently came across this modern book of Muslim etiquette and thought it illustrated the principles of Middle Eastern hospitality very well. Here are some extracts:

"A Muslim host should receive his guests heartily and with a welcoming smile. To honour and entertain a guest is an Islamic duty..."

The guest needs no invitation to come and stay for a number of days, though it is better if the visitor can inform the host in advance of his arrival. The guest can stay three days and then should leave...

If a guest comes to visit a Muslim, it is his duty, if he is able, to be hospitable and generous by offering him food and drink, whether or not he receives the same treatment when he visits him."²

Abraham certainly follows accepted custom and practice, but the writer emphasises his sincerity in doing so. He shows *humility* in bowing down before his guests. He also thinks about their needs:

⁴ Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree.

⁵ Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.'

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01ybdtz>

² *Morals & Manners in Islam* by Marwan Ibrahim Al-Kaysi (Leicester, The Islamic Foundation 1986), p156

In fact, Abraham plans to serve up much more than “a little bread” – they are in fact served a full roast dinner. But he doesn’t want them to be inconvenienced by unnecessary delay, and so everything is done as quickly as possible, without sacrificing quality:

²When he saw them, he *ran* from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground... ⁶And Abraham *hastened* into the tent to Sarah, and said, ‘Make ready *quickly* three measures of *choice* flour, knead it, and make cakes.’ ⁷Abraham *ran* to the herd, and took a calf, *tender and good*, and gave it to the servant, who *hastened* to prepare it.

I wonder how your hospitality and mine compares with that of Abraham? There are, of course, some important cultural differences between Abraham’s context and ours. For one thing, life was not so pressurised as it is for us. I know myself how I try to pack as many useful activities into the limited time available as I can. Our culture puts a high value on personal achievement. Time is precious and we often feel the need to justify spending time on an activity. Non-Western cultures have a different view of time – it is seen as the servant of the greater values of building social relationships. A watch may be valued more for its appearance as a piece of jewellery than for its role in making sure the owner keeps time.

One of the complaints of professional carers who visit elderly people in their homes is that they given a tight schedule that allows only just enough time for practical functions such as washing, dressing or preparing meals and no time to chat and listen to the client, which is just as important a need as the physical ones.

In my own life I’m very conscious that people are often reluctant to phone me or ask for pastoral support because of their perception that I’m too busy to have time to listen. The opposite is true. Please don’t hesitate to get in touch with myself or another member of the pastoral team if you would like to chat over a personal matter.

The way Abraham treats his visitors shows him to be generous not only with his time, but with his resources. He tells Sarah to use the best flour to bake cakes for them, and he looks out the best calf to serve up to them. Admittedly, he is by now a very rich man, but by giving his visitors of his very best he shows them respect and honour. I wonder if we are as open-handed with *our* resources?

Here are some other examples of hospitality in the Bible:

- Lot invites the 2 angels to stay with him in Sodom (Gen 19:1-11)
- Joseph lays on a feast for his brothers (Gen 43:31-34)
- Martha welcomes Jesus and his disciples into her home and cooks them a meal (Luke 10:38-42)
- Lydia, the trader in purple dye, invites Paul and Silas to stay in her home (Acts 16:14-15)

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament uses the Abraham story as an example for us all to follow:

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. (Hebrews 13:2)

Jesus talks about hospitality in a broader sense in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats:

³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;

³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?

³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:34-40 NRSV)

A rich reward

I'm reminded of the story of the Widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:8-16). In the midst of a famine, God sends the prophet Elijah to a widow who is about to cook her last meal for herself and her son before they die. She trusts God's promises and generously agrees to cook for Elijah first, and miraculously God makes sure her food continues to be sufficient for her, her son and Elijah till the drought ends.

After Abraham's three visitors have finished their meal, God makes Abraham and Sarah a firm commitment: within the year, his promise to give them a child will be fulfilled. Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? he asks in response to Sarah's disbelieving laughter. The answer is clearly that *nothing* is too wonderful for the Lord, or too hard for him to do. But as we are beginning to see in the story of Abraham, God asks something of us too, steps of faith that show we trust him. God wants to bring great blessing in our lives, but he expects us to do our bit too.

We have entered a time of hardship and scarcity for many people. The Covid crisis has dealt a devastating blow to many people's livelihoods, to the world economy and the economy of this country. Charities have been hard hit as fundraising events have been cancelled and donors feel the pinch. For some, the situation is a challenge to faith. For those of us who are still comfortably provided for, I think this situation is a test of our generosity. Will we, like Abraham, think first of the needs of others, and give from our resources to supply those needs? George and I have already made additional donations to two of the charities we support, to help them continue doing their vital work amongst the poor and disadvantaged. Our local Foodbank and other local charities will also need the help of generous donors in order to keep helping the vulnerable in the months and years to come. Are we up to the challenge of showing hospitality as Abraham did?

Thinking about our church, you may have read the article by our treasurer in the June newsletter. Our drop in income due to Covid may mean we have to dip into our

Mission Fund, which is there to resource our frontline Family Worker and in the future possibly our Youthworker too. I am praying that God will prompt those of us who have the resources to step up to the plate – and put some money in it!

Jesus promises that God will reward those who are generous:

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.' (Luke 6:38)

Before we even start thinking about our own generosity, let's remember the generosity of God which we have already received. The bread and wine of our Holy Communion reminds us of the price which Jesus paid for our salvation. How are we going to respond to *that* generosity?