

8th Sunday after Trinity, August 8th, 2025

8.00 and 10.30 Holy Communion, All Saints Oakham

Genesis 15.1-6, Hebrews 11.1-3, 8-16, Luke 12.32-40

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

At the beginning of the story of Abraham from the book of Genesis, we emerge from the writings and stories of the early chapters of that book, that explain, at least in theological and metaphorical terms how the world came into being and how it came to be as it is, into seeing, through the mists of perhaps 3500 to 4000 years, the life and times of a real character, with whom we can, at least to some extent, identify. Abraham's story wasn't written down for many centuries after he lived and breathed in the ancient middle east, and no doubt it both gained and lost something in the repeated telling. But the story as we have it, as part of both Jewish and Christian scriptures, contains much that is of significance and meaning for us. But it is probably not terribly familiar to many these days. So I begin with a brief summary of Abraham's life up to this point.

Abraham and his family are first seen in the Mesopotamian city of Ur, in modern day Iraq. We know little about the place, and one of the few residents that can be identified went by the name of Ea-nāṣir. He was a copper dealer, something of a fraud, and one of his customers, called Nanni, was so irate about the poor quality of the copper he was selling, and his mistreatment of his messengers, as to complain to him on a cuneiform clay tablet that was excavated in the 19th century, and is now in the British Museum. It is recognised by the Guiness Book of Records as the oldest customer complaint ever. And it contains perhaps one of the oldest threats "*Because you despised me, I shall inflict grief on you*". An immortality of a sort for Ea-nāṣir, I guess. But back to Abraham, whose memory has been immortalised for rather different reasons. Following what they believed was the call of the one true God, he and his family left Ur with their not inconsiderable number of followers, servants and slaves and large flocks of sheep, goats and camels, and made their way first north west and then south west into the land of Canaan. Here they led a pastoral, nomadic existence, with generally good relations between themselves and the other Canaanite nomads in the area, and God again appeared to Abraham to promise that he would be the father of many nations. As the years passed with Abraham's wife Sarah failing to produce a child, and both husband and wife becoming elderly, the fulfilment of God's promise appeared to be increasingly unlikely. The heir of much of his property remained a distant relative, Eliezer of Damascus. Abraham, in despair, turned to Hagar his slave girl to produce a child. But we hear in today's reading God again speaking to Abraham, affirming his promise, and telling him to look up to the sky.

Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be.

And we read, he believed, had faith in what was revealed to him, and

The Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

So we have in Abraham a story of obedience and faith. Firstly, an example of obedience in following the call of God, even though he didn't know where it would lead him, and indeed he never really found out why he had ended up in Canaan – the establishment of the nation of God's people in Canaan was to come many generations afterwards after the Exodus. And secondly an example of faith, that God's promises that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars would be fulfilled, but again he was only to see the very beginning of this fulfilment in the birth of his son Isaac.

This story is taken up by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews. Nobody really knows who this was, but it seems he was writing to Jewish Christians, who were finding their faith a struggle, perhaps caught up in the tensions between their Jewish background and their new found faith in Jesus. The writer holds Abraham, and indeed other Old Testament figures, up as examples of obedience and faith. Abraham was someone who followed God's call, to leave the urban comforts of Mesopotamia and to spend his life as a tent living foreigner amongst other tribes. And in doing so he showed that

He looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

The language used suggests that this is no physical city, but a picture of heaven, which was his true destination. They desired “*a better country, that is a heavenly one*” But also in believing God, he and Sarah were able to conceive, even though “*he was as good as dead*” and the promise of many descendants “*as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore*” was fulfilled, although of course Abraham did not live to see this. So, the writer argues, Abraham was an example of being obedient to God's call, setting his eyes on his heavenly rather than earthly destination, and also that there was a fulfilment of the God's promise to him, in terms of his descendants both physically through the Jewish nation and spiritually through the church. His readers too were Abraham's children in that sense. And this is used as an example, a call to faith, that God's purposes would be worked out in the lives of those reading the letter, even though they found it difficult to perceive

The gospel reading from Luke also has this twofold nature. Although Luke has a broad chronological arrangement that goes from Jesus's birth, through the ministry of John the Baptist, Jesus's ministry in Galilee, and the final trip to Jerusalem for the Passion, in between he tends to arrange his material thematically. In today's reading, Luke brings together some sayings of Jesus on how to live the life of the disciple. Firstly he gives instructions about the here and now. An assurance that his followers, his little flock, have been given the gift of the kingdom – the presence of God in his church. Receiving a gift in the culture of the time, brought with it obligations, and so too, his disciples have the obligation to use this gift wisely – acting generously and using the resources and possessions they have been given to help those in need.

Sell your possessions and give alms.

In doing so, Jesus' followers are given more, an unfailing treasure in heaven. And then one of the most memorable phrases of Jesus that in a few words, sums up the human condition.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

So an instruction to his followers, including us, to faithfully continue our Christian journey in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, using what we have been given for the good of others. In this week's Worship for the Week, Michael writes powerfully in similar vein, on the theme of our pilgrimage, our journey towards God. It is well worth a read.

But the passage that follows then contain more explicit instructions to anticipate and make ourselves ready for the future. Jesus uses one of his favourite illustrations of the return of the master from a wedding banquet, which would have been of indeterminate length, looking to find his servants and slaves alert and waiting for him. This is usually his way of describing the coming of God's kingdom in its fulness, either breaking through into our run of the mill activities, or when we enter into his presence beyond the grave, or, as Luke most probably understood it, when he fulfils his ultimate promise at the end of the age. He urges his disciples to

Be dressed and ready for action

This is not a good translation in my view. The Authorised Version gives the more literal form.

Let your loins be girded about

This describes the act of gathering up your cloak, passing it through your legs and tying it around your waist – a necessary precursor to any physical activity – farming, fishing, chopping your enemies head off and so on. But you get the point – be ready and watching for Jesus to fulfil his promise to come to us. And there is an interesting reversal here - the master, finding his people prepared, comes and serves them rather than vice versa. The servant king who washed his disciples feet, the one who humbled himself, taking the form of a servant.

So the readings seem to gives us an overall message through the example of the life of Abraham and the words of Jesus – to follow wherever God leads, even if our destination is uncertain, to be generous with the gifts we have been given, but also to look forward, to have faith that his promises will be brought to fulfilment in the future, particularly in terms of our ultimate destination in heaven.

So what is this saying to us on the 8th Sunday after Trinity in 2025, the first Sunday of the interregnum. Again, I think it is twofold. Firstly, simply to get on with the business of being Christians, to carry on with our journey in what is perhaps an unsettling time, even if we can't see a definite end in view; to be generous in our giving of time and resources to those around us and to the church. But there is a second point. As I was preparing this sermon the words that first struck me from the readings as being really relevant to how I was feeling at the time were from the letter to the Hebrews describing Abraham's condition.

he was as good as dead

I was having a bad day! But I suspect that many of us feel that way at times – old, tired and weary, no more so than in an interregnum. But, however we feel, however much time we have left on this earth, we are called to look up and look further ahead – to our Christian and church descendants in this place, Abraham's children of the future, to make sure we bequeath them a thriving, spirit-filled worshipping community, with the resources they will need to reach out to those around them. That is what Faith in the Future is about, and why it is so important that we continue to work in its development. And, although I say it with some temerity, maybe that will be counted to us as righteousness. But further to look up and further ahead for ourselves – to our own destination, our own entry into the heavenly city, into God's presence, and to let that hope sustain us on our journey into the immediate unknown territory. We must never lose sight of that.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen