

**June 7<sup>th</sup> 2026**

**10.30am Holy Communion at All Saints Oakham**

*Genesis 12.1-9, Romans 4.13-e, Matthew 9.9-13, 18-26*

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.

For the last few years, the pattern of our readings from the bible on Sunday have been the week by week reading of one of the gospels per year (Matthew, Mark or Luke) with bits of John's gospel thrown in at festivals, and the reading of sequential passages from one of the epistles or letters of the Paul or Peter and so on. The Old Testament reading has usually been a passage that relates in some way or other to the gospel reading and gives it some context. This is called the "related" track in the lectionary where all the readings are set out. However the lectionary also contains something called the "continuous" track, where the Old Testament reading, like the epistle and gospel, reads through a book sequentially. This year, for the Sunday's after Trinity (of which this is the first of twenty one) we will be reading passages from the books of Genesis and Exodus, the first two books of the bible, that tell the stories of the Patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph and the Exodus. We won't be preaching on them every week, but nonetheless we will still hear their story week by week, that will be picked up from time to time in sermons. To kick off today, I will look at the Old Testament reading from Genesis 12 in a bit more detail, to give a bit of context and introduction.

The first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis, contain the majestic poetry of the creation story, the fall of humanity, the story of the flood and of the tower of Babel, stories that, rather than give what we would take as a scientific account of the early years of our planet and species, rather try to explain, in terms of poetry and images, why things are as they are, why humanity is in its current restless and divided state. But at the end of Chapter 11, the nature of the story changes, we are introduced to specific people, living at a specific time – Terah and his three sons, Haran, Nahor and Abram and Lot, the son of Haran. As was not uncommon Nahor married a daughter of Haran, Milcah and Abram married another of his daughters – Sarai.

But before we go any further, it is worth saying a little more about the nature of the story that follows. Many historians and Old Testament scholars are very sceptical of whether or not the patriarchs actually existed in historical terms. However it seems to me that scepticism is almost a professional requirement of academics in this regard, and in terms of the historicity of scripture, there is what has been called a hermeneutic of scepticism – the framework in which historians works. To be regarded as respectable, they have to be a sceptic. I am much less sceptical – the stories of the patriarchs contain many details specific to their period – somewhere around 2000 to 1500 BC, and present pictures of very believable individuals. That being said, the stories would have survived in oral

transmission for over a thousand years or more before being written down, being reflected on and retold countless times from generation to generation, and in the written version we can at times see the join between two different versions that have been edited together. So what we have is the product of these retelling, these reflections, that highlighted those things of importance to the tellers and listeners. Most importantly, these stories have come to be regarded as scripture through which God speaks to his people down the ages. In them, we see the lives of some specific individuals – the intermittently faithful Abraham and Isaac, the deceitful trickster Jacob, the cynical Sarai, the scheming mothers Rachel and Rebecca and the obnoxious younger son Joseph. We will hear more about them over the coming weeks. And we can see in the reading from Romans this morning, a further reflection on the story of Abraham, as the basis for Paul's rather dense argument in that book.

But back to the story, Just before our reading begins we read in chapter 11 that Terah lived in the city of Ur, in the south of Mesopotamia, near the confluence of the great rivers Tigris and Euphrates, and he set out from a journey there northwards, up the river, taking Abram and his wife Sarai and grandson Lot with him, and they settled in the city of Haran in modern day eastern Turkey (confusingly the same name as that of one of Terah's sons), where they remained for a considerable amount of time. We are told that Sarai was barren and that she and Abram had no children. Then we read of the events of chapter 12 of Genesis. Abram heard God speaking to him, calling him to leave Haran to some unknown land with a promise that he would become a great nation, even through Sarai's barrenness. So he left for his unknown destination with Sarai and Lot. By this time, it is clear that Abram was a wealthy man, with many possessions, herds and flocks, with many followers, including no doubt many slaves, They travelled south towards Canaan, coming to Shechem in the region we would call the West Bank today. But the nature of the country was very different from today. There were no nations as such – a few semi-fortified cities at Ai, Bethel, Jericho, Sodom and Gomorrah, each with their petit-kings, and there were bands of pastoralists and nomads that moved across the region in search of pasture. The population density was much, much lower than at present, and the journey of Abram wasn't unusual – just another tribe of herdsmen and pastoralists moving through the country. Shechem is to feature in a major way in the story of the Patriarchs – the place where Jacob wrestles with God, the place where Joseph is buried, and it was there that Abram again heard God saying that he would give this land to his offspring. In response, Abram built an altar, and worshipped there, presumably sacrificing on it – acting as a priest in the days before there was a specifically anointed priesthood. But his journey continued, and he and all his family, his herds and flocks moved up to the hill country to the east, in the same range of hills of the city of Salem, the future Jerusalem, to Bethel and Ai, where he again built an altar and worshipped, and then moved on, by stages, over the months and the years, to the south, the Negeb, then a more intensively populated land, the gateway to Egypt.

And there today's passage ends. But what are we to take from it? Firstly there is something that needs to be addressed that I think makes it difficult for us to hear what the passage is saying to us- the appalling situation in the area of Canaan today, where two groups are each trying to wipe the other out. How can we talk about God's promise to give the land

to Abram when we see where these verses of scripture have apparently led? First I would say, Abram here is an ambiguous character in this regard – the father of both Isaac and Ishmael, the progenitor of both Jews and Arabs according to tradition, so it is difficult to interpret this passage in terms of the current conflicts. Secondly the promise of God is to bless the entire world through the descendants of Abram – and clearly that is not happening in Israel and Palestine at the moment. Thirdly, the Abraham story has, over the centuries become a vehicle for a whole range of theological interpretations – not least in Paul’s letter to the Romans, which we will come back to in a few moments – and, in Christian terms, the New Testament suggest that the Old Testament promises now apply to the church rather than to any Jewish state. So I would ask, if you can, to put the current concerns aside as we go on to consider the deeper meaning of the story for us today.

That having been said, the first thing to notice is that Abram heard God speak. We are not told how or over what period. Perhaps he did hear a voice from heaven or see a vision (and I don’t rule out the possibility of either) but I would guess he heard God speak in much the same way as we do, through circumstances, through patient prayer, through inward conviction. But when he did here him, he had faith to believe him. And on the way, he worshipped when he heard God’s direction – at Shechem, at Bethel – although the end of the journey was still not revealed. And that is where the story is relevant to us. As I said, over the centuries, the story of Abram has been retold and reinterpreted. Paul in his letter to the Romans uses it as an illustration of the importance of faith. In this case, faith in what Jesus has done for us through his death and resurrection.

*Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become ‘the father of many nations,’ according to what was said, ‘So numerous shall your descendants be.’ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.*

Abram having heard and believed, he had the strength to follow – along a journey with no fixed route and no end point – a model for the followers of Jesus. And in his worship, his offerings on the altars at Shechem and Bethel, his faith grew strong.

In another New Testament letter, that to the Hebrews, addressed to a small struggling Hebrew speaking congregation facing opposition and persecution, the writer reflects on both Abram and other heroes of the faith, and sees Abram’s journey as an encouragement for his readers in their earthly pilgrimage.

*All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.*

In a similar vein, did you notice the brief sentence in the gospel reading?

*As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him.*

Like Abram, Matthew heard, he believed, he took action.

So three points arise. Firstly do we put ourselves in a position to listen to God – through regular prayer, meditation, scripture reading? That seems to me to be a pre-requisite to trying to follow God. Then having heard in whatever fleeting and indistinct way, there is the challenge to believe and to follow, even when that call is hard – we are too old, too settled in our ways, too weary to bother, to take on new challenges, whatever they might be. We just want an easy life, a nice quiet retirement perhaps. And through it all to continue to worship, to continue to give thanks for any situation we find ourselves in. The simplest, yet most profound of messages.

Now there is a song that children sing at times of change when leaving school that I am sure many of you know “*One more step along the world I go*”. When you have sung this over and over again at various events, it gets really irritating! I whinged about it to Stephen once (our last vicar for those who don’t know), as he was on his way to do a leaver’s service at school, and he convinced me that it was actually rather good theology. So I end with some verses from it now, as on reflection it does seem to me to sum up what we can learn from the uncertain, twisting journey of Abram, an example of how we should react to God’s calling. Try to avoid the urge to sing along as I read it!

*One more step along the world I go  
One more step along the world I go  
From the old things to the new  
Keep me traveling along with you*

*As I travel through the bad and good  
Keep me traveling the way I should  
Where I see no way to go  
You'll be telling me the way, I know*

*Give me courage when the world is rough  
Keep me loving though the world is tough  
Leap and sing in all I do  
keep me traveling along with you*

*And it's from the old I travel to the new  
Keep me traveling along with you*