

When we left Abram and Sarai last week they had embarked on their long journey, leaving home at Haran, and arriving at the land which God had chosen for them. There was a little side trip to Egypt which so clearly showed us Abram's very human side. This morning in chapter 15 we have the great promise repeated and sealed in a covenant ceremony.

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.' But Abram said, 'O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, He (the Lord) brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

This chapter 15 is, if you know anything at all about Abram, the one which is most closely associated in our minds with his deep, abiding faith. The verse: *And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness* embodies the very essence of Abram's faith which is often presented as unshakable. This is the verse that Paul quotes in two of his letters to the Romans and the Galatians. It gives us a picture of the "ideal" faith which is strong and unshakable.

But is this actually what Genesis 15 is telling us about Abram and his faith. I wonder how helpful this understanding of faith is in our own Lenten journey, in our own life journey. If you are someone blessed with a strong faith, someone for whom belief comes easily then you will probably find in Abram a model easy to identify with. But if you are someone like me who struggles with doubt and uncertainty at times then simply being told to have faith is not always helpful. When we set out on this journey with Abram I said that one of the things I really like about him was his oh so human side. Chapter 15 really helps us to see that because it is actually more about God than Abram - more about God's faithfulness than about Abram's faith.

To fill in the background Abram has followed God to the promised land walking, as we saw last week, the length and breadth of this land, building altars and worshipping God. But his faith faltered and he fled to Egypt to escape famine and got into a real tangle with Pharaoh.

In the intervening chapters, after his return to the promised land, it is still not all plain sailing because Abram takes another sideways journey this time leading an army to rescue his nephew Lot. Here at chapter 15 Abram again begins to worry about the fulfilment of the promise that he will have many descendants. He, there is no other word for it, Abram badgers God about how this promise will ever be fulfilled. This is not a picture of faith, rather it is a picture of doubt and uncertainty. Abram nags away at God asking for reassurance, asking for some sign that what God has promised will in fact be given to him and Sarai. I guess many of us can identify with this pleading for reassurance.

After all having an heir, legitimate heir, was vital in Abram's time. This was how someone made their mark in the world. God's promise back in chapter 12 *to make Abram's descendants a great nation* reflects the reality of this time and place. For Abram this is a problem of great proportions because all of God's promises to him are dependent on him having a son. How can he become a great nation without this son? What good is the great name he is promised without a son to pass it on to? What is the point of God's promise to give the land of Canaan to Abram's offspring if he doesn't have any? You can see the problem and why Abram questions God repeatedly about the reality of these promises. Why he seems to continually need reassurance from God.

In the opening verses of chapter 15 God offers this in a vision designed to comfort and reassure Abram: *Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.* but Abram still doubts and voices his worry. God goes on to again promise not just descendants but also the land. *I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.* Does Abram respond with belief and gratitude, no he does not! In fact the response of this *Giant of Faith* sounds almost wheedling: *But he said, 'O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?'* God responds with a very practical demonstration which which to us seems very odd indeed!

If we had time to explore the place of animal sacrifice not just in the Old Testament but also in the New Testament we would soon discover that this particular sacrificial act described in Genesis 15 is very, very unusual. We don't have that time so it is best to cut to the chase and focus on the key element which *seals the deal* so to speak.

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.'

This is basically God, *in smoke and flame*, promising to take on all responsibility for fulfilling the promises. The point of this complicated ritual is to reassure Abram that God is trustworthy and the promises reliable. This is God's response to the question: *how can I know?* It may appear strange, unfamiliar, even bizarre to us but to the first hearers/readers of the story it would have been a satisfactory demonstration of God's faithfulness to Abram.

I imagine that most, if not all of us, have asked of God this same question: *how can I know?* We have sought, or perhaps are still seeking the reassurance and comfort of God's faithfulness. It should be of comfort to us that even the *Great Father of Faith*, even Abraham had times of doubt and uncertainty. The demonstrations of God faithfulness for us will, I hope, not involve animal sacrifice but Abraham's story helps us to see that God's faithfulness is with us even at our times of doubt and uncertainty.

I know that I find the Abraham who is a mixed bag of strength, doubt and vulnerability a much more hopeful and realistic traveling companion through Lent.

The desert waits,
ready for those who come,
who come obedient to the Spirit's leading;
or who are driven,
because they will not come any other way.