

Faith and Promises

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18, Philippians 3:17-4:1, Luke 3:31-35,

What does it take for us to trust God? How long are we prepared to wait for answers to prayer? In today's reading from Genesis, God appeared once again to Abraham. It was many years after the initial promise, and Abraham and Sarah were still childless, getting older, and they've made some mistakes along the way. They've not always trusted God. Why should they continue to trust him now? Today's scene shows us a crisis of trust and faith.

God's first words are, "Fear not." Then God renewed his promise of an heir and home country. If I were Abraham, I'd think, "Of course, I'm frightened, anxious about my future, separated from my home and people. I have no heir. It doesn't look like things are ever going to change. I can't believe that you're still promising me this." And Abraham said as much, protesting that God had not delivered.

God responded by doubling down on his promise. He assured Abraham: "Look to the night skies, and number the stars. You can't count them all. Those are your descendants. Your family will be enormous beyond your imagining." The promise got bigger, even more outlandish.

Then the most remarkable moment, Abraham asks God for a sign, for proof that these promises for sons and

lands will come about. And God gives him that proof – how often do we ask God for proof because we don't trust. But after a restless night Abraham repented. He renewed his commitment to God, believing in God's promise, even though it appeared ludicrous. Abraham turned away in faith from his own understanding of reality and accepted God's reality. From this story, Abraham would have to wait another dozen years to father Isaac with Sarah. Wow!

Abraham became the model of faith and righteousness, not because he was perfect, he and Sarah had their doubts and failures, but because they desired a right relationship with God and built their trust in Him.

Abraham's relationship with God is not unlike our own. *Anyone* who seeks God, can look in the mirror and say, "Not perfect. Not always trusting. Not always on great terms with everyone". But most of us desire right relationship with God and other people. We desire reconciliation.

For Paul, this conversation between God and Abraham was super important and he talks a lot about it in Romans. Paul says Abraham's faith is based upon God's promise that despite the way things are in the here and now, they will be better than we can imagine or comprehend. God will overcome all the difficulties of the here and now and make life new. He urges us in today's reading to stand firm in faith and believe.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem” says Jesus, “the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it”. Yet Jesus, full of faith, sets on His journey. Later, Jesus will tell a powerful story about a vineyard owner sending servant after servant to collect from his tenants his share of the harvest. Each servant is insulted, injured, and thrown out. Finally, the vineyard owner sends his own son thinking he will be respected. But no, the tenants kill the son thinking that by doing this the vineyard will become their own.

There’s no doubt that Jesus identifies himself as that son, sent by his father in the hope that he would be accepted where others had been rejected. Jesus knew, when he set his face towards Jerusalem, what danger he would be in – but he’s going anyway. He is faithful to His calling. He trusts the Father.

Faith is about being willing to journey into the unknown and to look for God in the people we encounter and be grateful for God’s presence there. Faith is about doing our best, risking and making mistakes, and finding opportunity even in our troubles. Lent is about turning to that kind of faith, renewing it in our lives, turning to God and trusting our lives to Him. Imagine someone who can’t repent, or who has nowhere to turn for renewal, or who has to construct their own purpose and identity and belonging. Imagine

someone who has little sense of acceptance as they are, who feels they have to prove their worth.

Following Jesus means we repeatedly get to turn back to God and find ourselves again in him, renewing our sense of belonging to him, being cherished by him. As Christians, our faith involves the changing of our hearts and minds, of growing and learning, of adventure into the unknown, but sure of God’s presence and care. Re-ordering our lives and trusting in God’s promise of love no matter what.

Abraham showed us that faith has nothing to do with doctrine, but a way of life, a life disposed to openness to God, to receiving God, to giving to God, rather than trying to control and arrange the world, rather than trying to satisfy ourselves.

It takes a lot of courage to be truly honest with ourselves and with God. We become very vulnerable and perhaps afraid of the consequences. But let’s hold on to the picture of a tender, compassionate and merciful God who in Jesus holds out his arms in love to reach us and strengthen us with his own extraordinary love and courage. Following Jesus, we choose to have faith and trust God, to hope in the future, and to hold to that great promise and believe that we are in His hands.