

Second Sunday of Lent

4th March 2012

Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16; Rom 4: 13-25; Mark 8: 31-8

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When I hear or read stories about Abraham two things strike me: he is just incredibly old, and he seems to live in a world quite different from the world we live in.

Perhaps his age should not surprise us. His name Abraham (or in the shorter form Abram) means Great Father, or Exalted Ancestor. Even if we assume he lived, once, as a person, in the stories he is almost a role, an archetype, the legendary founder of the nation. So of course he's going to appear to us as old. Sometimes people call their father 'the old man'; well, if your father is the old man how old is your ultimate ancestor going to be?

The early chapters of Genesis tell of early patriarchs living to extraordinary ages – 969 years in the case of Methusalah – so Abraham's 175 years is only a shadow of that. He is old before his story starts: 75 years old when he is called to get up and leave Haran and begin his wanderings into the land of Canaan. We are not told the age of his wife Sarai, or Sarah, but she is well beyond the age of child-bearing in the story we hear today, and Abraham is 99.

And the other thing which strikes me is how different his world is. As you read these legends it is hard to get a picture of what life is like for them at a superficial level. What did they wear? What did they eat? What did they do most of the time? What did they talk about?

If you were well brought up, your imagination will be filled with pictures out of a child's bible supplying such images – long beards, flowing robes, sheep grazing on hills and so on – but none of these are in the text. All there is in the text is Abram talking to God, and though we are told God 'appeared to him' there is no visual presentation at all. God seems to 'appear to him' as a *voice*, talking.

Someone once commented that Abraham's story is 'fraught with background', meaning that his life or his consciousness has nothing in the foreground, no superficial clutter, nothing much that we can see, but it seems to open inwards, or backwards, on to a depth, or a density, out of which he hears the divine voice.

Perhaps we can learn something from dwelling in such stories. I read someone the other day writing earnestly about 'the hectic busyness of 21st century life' as if hectic busyness was a fact, something we have no choice about. Fifty years ago when televisions, fridges and washing machines were coming on the market in cheap forms it was said we would all soon be living lives of leisure while machines did the work for us. Not true, of course: we have given up much of the leisure we had to earn the money to pay for the machines, and the even better machines, and then the very latest model with extra fancy gadgets.

Enslaved to our computers, with so much *stuff* in the foreground of our lives, how can we have freedom to attend to the depth of things. If God Almighty appeared in our home today, what would we say? – 'I've just got to send this email…'

What does God say to Abraham? 'Walk before me', or better 'Live in my presence', which is exactly what he has been doing – living in the presence of the Holy One, the mysterious source of life who calls to him – open to the depth and density of things, and ready to fall on his face before that presence in total submission to its demands and promises.

But now there is a third thing which strikes me about Abraham, and that is his faithfulness. The word doesn't appear in the stories but it is what the stories are about, and it's what later writers say about him: for Jews, including St Paul, he was the model of *emunah*, which means firmness, stability, trustworthiness, faithfulness. From the word *emunah* we get our response *Amen,* meaning 'that's true, sure thing, absolutely'.

Firmness is a great value in any relationship. If people are firm, stable, faithful, you know where you are with them. Jacob on his deathbed dismissed his eldest son Reuben for being 'unstable as water' (Gen 49: 4). But Abraham, whose life is open to the divine, stands firm and walks surely in even the darkest trials. His firmness and his consciousness of God are related: knowing God, his firmness arises out of his trust in the firmness, the fidelity of God. He has a sure basis for his life, which gives his life its shape and solidity.

And us? How do we measure up to the firmness of Abraham? Where is our firmness lodged? In the changing things of life, the necessities placed on us by markets and media? Do we find some stability in commitment to our family or our work? Do we have a sense of what God might be drawing us to do with our life, some awareness springing out of the depth of things?

What would make you or me fall on our face, as Abraham did, before the face of the divine Holy One? And what would happen then?

The challenge placed before Abraham, and which lies before us potentially at every moment, fell on *Jesus' disciples* like a ton of bricks.

Jesus is another knower of God, isn't he? – one who lived out of the mystery of God, the Holy One he called Father – though we only once or twice overhear what he and God said to each other, such as: 'I thank you Father that you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants' (Matt 11: 25).

If we could get inside Jesus' mind, the way the story-tellers enable us to get inside the mind of Abraham, we might find it to have that same spacious quality: unoccupied by trivia about what to eat and drink, or what to wear; under no pressure from those things which close life in, but opening in freedom on to the immensity of GOD, in an endless exchange of love.

Wasn't that what he meant when he said 'don't worry about those things, what to eat or what to wear', 'take no thought for the morrow' [Matt 6: 31, 34], 'Seek first God's kingdom', and all these things will be yours as well [Matt 6: 33]? The richness of

life is found in letting all that go, being open to the love welling up out of the source of Life.

We know a bit more about the foreground of Jesus' life than we do about Abraham's, but actually not a lot more. We don't know what he ate or what he wore, if we are interested in such things (which for some reason we are, though he wasn't).

These stories, like Abraham's, give us little of that, and though they seldom get us into Jesus' mind they do show us him trying to open his mind to his friends, to draw them in, to share with them what it was like for him, and what it could be like for them, to live in awareness of the wonder of GOD.

You can imagine the fascination of being with someone, day by day, who gave out this sense of wonder. Perhaps that's why it was such a shock for them when he told them that the good times were about to end: 'The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, and be *killed,* and after three days rise again'. The path to eternal life, for him as for Abraham, and for us, is in letting go of everything we might hang on to as our possession and our support, in order to receive it back as a gift from God.

That was the risky promise that made Abraham fall on his face in total submission. That was the risky promise that made Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem. His mission was to reveal in action, in conflict with the political powers of his day, that *reality is cross-shaped*, that the only life we can gain is the life we are willing to let go of, to receive it back from God.

When Peter resisted this truth, this divine necessity (as you and I would), he is rebuked in the strongest possible terms: 'Get behind me *Satan*! You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things'. Does that seem too harsh? Perhaps. But what would be the cost for the world if you successfully tempted the Son of Man to turn aside from the destiny placed upon him?

But equally: what is the cost for your life or mine if we allow ourselves to be tempted into giving first place to things that don't matter? – looking for firmness in what is utterly unstable, clogging our minds and our hearts with what is not life-giving, in order to keep ourselves safe from God?

Can we hear the promise, as well as the threat, in Jesus' call: 'the Son of Man must suffer … and be killed, and after three days *rise again*'?

What does taking up our cross mean? – 'Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it'. What does that mean for us? What things must we each let go of, and take up (and help each other to let go of, and to take up), if we are to let the reality of the cross and resurrection enter our mind and heart and reshape them?

I think finally of Dag Hammarskjöld, who was famous fifty years ago as the first Secretary General of the United Nations, a man whose life was apparently consumed with what I have called the foreground of things, the effort required to hold together the fragile peace of the world.

He died in a plane crash in the Congo in 1961, and after his death his private diary disclosed a completely different man. It showed the God-consciousness of a person who, while dealing with thee things, knew himself to be 'walking before God', living in God's presence, and knowing the demand and the freedom of that relationship. Looking back, not long before his death, he wrote this:

> "I don't know Who – or what – put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer *Yes* to Someone – or Something – and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life in self-surrender had a goal.
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> From that moment [he wrote] I have known what it means 'not to look back', and 'to take no thought for the morrow' [*Markings*, p. 169]."

We surely hear in these words an echo of the Lenten journey. Jesus taught us by his life that the way of the Cross, however dark it may look, is in fact the way of Life, the way to lay hold of the Life, the freedom of God. He waits for each of us to say (like Abraham, like Dag Hammarskjöld) our *Yes* to that promise.