

## **Eighth Sunday after Trinity, Proper 12 Year C**

**25 July 2010. Iffley**

*Genesis 18:20-32*

I want to preach about that first reading this morning: the story of Abraham pleading with God. For me, it is one of the most remarkable passages in the whole of Scripture.

What do you remember about Abraham? There are really two stories we seem always to remember. Abraham leaving Ur to go on his long journey – the end of which is unclear to him. And the sacrifice of Isaac. In both of those stories, Abraham is obedient, passive. In the first story he says nothing at all, and in the second he says “Here I am” twice and nothing more. Every time I read that story I am amazed at Abraham’s passivity. He is asked to sacrifice his longed for son, and yet there is no protest, no howl of anguish. It is extraordinary. But here, in this story, which is set between those two accounts, Abraham has plenty to say – in fact he argues with God. And there are important reasons for us to remember it. Let me remind you of what happens.

Abraham is camped by the Oak trees at Mamre. There is he visited by God, who comes with two other mysterious persons. In these early chapters of Genesis, God seems to walk the land of Canaan as God walked in Eden – except that in Eden God walks openly. Here in Canaan God is always in disguise, hidden in the garb of a stranger. Abraham orders food to be prepared, and then God promises Abraham that he and Sarah will have a son. And Sarah, old and past childbearing, hears what is said as she hides within the tent, and she laughs. And later, when their child is born, as God said would happen, the boy is called Isaac – which means laughter in Hebrew.

But that is the future. Now, the meal ended, God indicates that he must go to Sodom and Gomorrah, because so many rumours have reached his ears about the outrageous behaviour of the people there. Abraham decides to accompany God on part of the journey – to show the way as it were.

When they come near, the two men with God go on ahead to make the investigation, while God and Abraham remain together. Abraham has clearly deduced what God has in mind – destruction of the towns and all of the people in them. And so he begins that extraordinary plea – as it were confronting God with his pleading. *“Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it?”* And when God accepts that, Abraham does not let it go. He presses on. *“Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking?”*

*Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?"* And on and on he goes, pressing and pressing, until the number of righteous in the city for which it will be forgiven is down to a mere ten. It is an extraordinary dialogue.

What is happening here? It is important to note that this is not bargaining. If it were bargaining, God would have responded with a much higher figure of righteous in response to Abraham's first fifty, and they would have tried to meet someone in the middle. It is, on one level, I suppose, an early form of moral argument. There are two moral absolutes at play here. The first is that wickedness, in a moral world, should not go unpunished. And against that is set the fact that it is quite wrong that good people should suffer because of other people's wrong doing. These two things are thrown about here, tested against each other. But there is something else. Don't forget that the bible is one long narrative. In the mind of the writer who put Genesis together will be the story of the flood. There God did indeed punish the whole world – righteous and unrighteous. And at the end God resolved never to do such a thing again. A rainbow was set in the sky as a mark of that resolution. So here, it is as if Abraham is saying "Remember the rainbow."

And there we have the extraordinary thing about this passage. It is as if Abraham is teaching God to be God. "Remember," he is saying, "you may be a God of Justice. But you are also a God of compassion and mercy. And if you are *not* that God of mercy, will you not cease to be God? So be the God of compassion and mercy." That is the heart of it: it is as if Abraham is teaching God to be God. And there is no other passage of scripture quite like it.

I am sorry to say that the outcome here in Genesis is not good. The next day, after a night in which they are threatened by an appalling abuse of the sacred rules of hospitality, God's angels do indeed rescue Abraham's nephew Lot and his family – save for Lot's wife who looks back with regret – but the cities are destroyed with terrible fire. Perhaps there were not even ten righteous there. Perhaps the demands of justice triumphed over the demands of mercy. We are not told. And, in the long narrative that is the bible, it is not until the end of Isaiah, and God's suffering servant, that this idea of righteousness offsetting the punishment of evil emerges again. And then of course we meet it on Calvary. On the cross the life of one good man brings forgiveness for all.

But what does this story mean for us?

Something important I think. One of the experiences of Christian prayer is that we come very close into the mystery of God's presence in this world. We feel, in a deep part of ourselves, the agony of someone's terminal illness – someone we perhaps don't even know - or the ongoing impossibility of Afghanistan. More profoundly than we can ever feel it, that is God's concern. Prayer brings us close to God's profound concerns.

Last Sunday I was presiding at the Eucharist which came at the end of a retreat conference that I attended. There were about as many people there as there are here today, some of whom had come from different parts of the world to take part. We took the intercessions immediately after the prayer of consecration and thanksgiving, and I simply invited people to say the name of someone, or name a situation they wished us all to remember before God. We were in a circle with the altar in the middle. And for the next five/six minutes people spoke a name or said a short sentence, putting it into the circle of prayer, as it were. And it was impossible not to feel the immense power for good of that five minutes. Name by name we pleaded – as if we were standing with God in the dilemmas this world faces.

This story tells us who we are. Like Abraham, we are people who stand before God, and we plead for the world. That is our task as Christians. We know all about the way one misguided/evil person can affect whole groups of others negatively – with terrible results. But we should not underestimate the power of the reverse. Prayer matters, our prayer for justice and mercy matters. Good people, gathered together for prayer before God matter, because the force for good in God that is released changes things. We should not underestimate that. It may not happen immediately and we may not even see the outcome. But it happens. Our pleading and our prayer changes things.

That is why it is worth remembering Abraham for this.