

Scripture: Genesis 15: 1-6 / Luke 12: 22-34

Text: *Abram believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness*

(Genesis 15: 6)

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT, AMEN**

Disappointed, disillusioned, the very least you could say about Abram is that he was frustrated. He had done everything God had asked him to do. He had left his country, his people, his household. He had set out on a journey to a land God promised to show him. It would be a land flowing with milk and honey, and Abram's descendents would be as many as the stars.

Yet despite all God's reassurances that Abram would enjoy a great reward, Abram appears thoroughly frustrated and disillusioned.

And the problem ?

The problem was God had promised Abram and Sarai a son, a son who would succeed him.

And Abram and Sarai had no son.

To compound the situation, Abram was now an old man and his wife Sarai had long passed the age of child bearing. There were no IVF clinics to which they could turn for help and so as far as Abram could tell the situation was quite literally hope-less.

So it is that against this background of frustration, disappointment and hopelessness that we come to one of the most important and influential verses in the whole Bible

*Abram believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness.*

This was the verse that shaped St Paul's great doctrine of justification by faith rather than by good works.

This was the verse that inspired the great reformer Martin Luther to react against the corruption of the church of his day, in particular its practice of selling indulgences in order to gain credit with God, to declare once more that faith and faith alone is essential for salvation.

Of course, like another New Testament writer, James, I would want to say that a person's faith should have an important influence on how that person lives. Belief ought to influence conduct and none of us would welcome being called a hypocrite, guilty of believing one thing but doing another

As evidenced by his willingness to venture all for God, Abram could never be called a hypocrite because his faith was deep and sincere and it was more than matched by his actions. Yet here he is, angry and frustrated for as far as he could tell it would be a servant, not a son, who would be his heir.

But then, in an extraordinary twist to the narrative, God's promise is renewed. Instead of incurring God's wrath, Abram is told again that he will father a son and heir. And,

as if to underline the point, he is led outside and told to look up at the night sky and count the stars, if indeed he could count them, for that would be the number of his descendents.

*(And) Abram believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness.*

So what was it that was credited to Abram as righteousness ?

Given the circumstances with which he was faced, his own age and that of his wife, the sensible thing for Abram to have done would have been to dispose of his affairs on the assumption that there would be no son and heir.

Yet rather than doing the sensible thing, Abram persisted in his belief that God could be trusted to keep God's promises

And it was this that was credited to him as righteousness, his simple yet profound conviction that even when the evidence appeared to point in the opposite direction, God can always be trusted.

*Abram believed the Lord* and one of the questions this wonderful story raises is the question of power.

What persuaded Abram that God can be trusted ?

Or to put that another way, what kind of power does God exert to command a person's trust and obedience even when the human evidence suggests otherwise ?

As it has explored the question of power, Christian theology has described God as *omnipotent*, all powerful. Presumably this means that being omnipotent, God can do as God wills. If God wants something to happen or not to happen then what could stand in God's way ?

The answer, of course, is nothing.

Yet, as this story reveals, and as we know from our own life experience, there is no celestial magic wand, no voice or thunderbolt from heaven, that suddenly makes something happen or not happen.

Evidently God chooses to exercise God's power in a very different way. And that of course begs the questions; what kind of power is God's power and what is the different way in which God chooses to exercise it?

The clue lies in the text itself.

Abram wasn't forced to believe God, indeed the evidence suggested that he shouldn't do so. Yet Abram chose to believe, chose to commit his life to trusting God would do what God had promised, namely, provide him with a son and heir.

So the first thing to say about God's power is that it allows for human response.....and not just for Abram.

Jesus had to respond.

At the beginning of his ministry the gospels record Jesus retreated to the wilderness, forty days and nights during which time he prepared himself for the task that lay ahead of him. Would he turn stone into bread, would he throw himself from the highest point of the temple, would he bow down and worship the devil, or would he use his gifts and opportunities to proclaim that the kingdom of God was near.

What the temptation narrative reveals is that God did not force Jesus' trust and obedience, instead Jesus willingly committed himself into his Father's hands.

In the same way, Jesus never forced fishermen to leave their nets and follow him. Having borrowed Simon Peter's boat and preached to the crowd that morning on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus invited the fishermen brothers to follow.....and they did.

Later the sisters Martha and Mary, the blind beggar Bartimaeus and the tax collector Zaccaheus would all hear the same invitation and be faced with that same moment of decision.

Abram had to choose, Jesus had to choose, the disciples had to choose, and so do you.

No-one forces you to believe in God or to come to church. No-one forces you to read the Bible or to pray. You choose to do so.....or better, you respond to what we all discern to be God's invitation and calling, God's presence and purpose in our lives and in our world.

Abram believed.....and if that element of choice and response lies at the heart of God's power, what a contrast this provides from the normal human experience of power.

Each day the news bulletins report on the terrible use of military power to kill, defeat and destroy. Share prices rise and fall as the power of the market dominates the economic life of the country. In more ways than we probably realise our lives are shaped by the power of marketing and advertising. And whether it was the Boxing Day tsunami those years ago, the dreadful earthquakes in China or Haiti, the ash cloud from Iceland's volcano or the recent flooding in Pakistan, the power of nature can be both awesome and devastating.

Political, military, economic, natural ; if these are some of the ways in which we use and experience power, it is evident God's power is very different.

Far from trying to dominate and destroy, God's power is the power to create and reconcile.

Far from trying to manipulate and control, God's power is the power to heal and forgive.

Far from trying to force anyone to do anything, God's power seeks to encourage, persuade, inspire and invite.

Why ?

Because the power of God is the power of love.

Love encourages, love persuades, love heals, love forgives, love does not go away, love does not give in or give up and love goes on loving even when all the evidence points the other way.

Whatever else the Bible reveals, it reveals that love is at the heart of the creative, reconciling, healing, forgiving power of God. What is more it claims that this divine love found a human face in the carpenter from Nazareth.

Do you believe that ?

Do you believe that in all Jesus said and did, but especially in the dreadful events of Calvary and the quiet surprise of Easter morn, love's victory was won over all that is evil, all that is wrong in our world, over death itself ?

Abram believed.....and if like him you respond in faith to the love that has sought and found you, you too will find that God can be trusted to keep all God has promised.

**Now unto him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end, Amen**