Sermon for 11th in Ordinary Year A

Readings: Genesis 18:1-15; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8

i

The Lord appeared to Abraham as he sat in the heat of the day – and then we immediately launch into the story of the three visitors – one of whom seems to be the Lord. Jewish tradition has identified the three visitors as the three archangels, Gabriel, Michael and Raphael, but the way the Lord interjects throughout the course of the story does not fit easily with such an interpretation.

Genesis 19 opens with the two angels arriving in Sodom, and so reading that back into chapter 18 suggests the Lord and two angels are the more likely protagonists.

Christians have seen in this story a pre-incarnate visitation by Christ. Certainly, the story of this visit has some interesting parallels with parts of the New Testament, particularly John 13-14.

* God appears to Abraham as a man
* Jesus says, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father (John 14:9)
* God has his feet washed by Abraham
* Jesus has to wash his disciples’ feet. His feet are washed by the tears of women.
* God ate a meal with Abraham
* Jesus eats the Last Supper with his disciples
* God predicts the future gift of a son to Abraham and Sarah – and this promise is renewed when God provides a sacrificial lamb to save Isaac’s life in Genesis 22.
* Jesus offers himself as the Lamb of God and promises the future gift of the Holy Spirit.

We also have in this story the next major step in God’s plan of salvation. The first decisive step has been in Abraham responding to the call to become a father of a great nation and a blessing to all families on the earth (Genesis 12:2-3). Abraham and Sarah have accepted that call. They have done the bit that depended on them – they have courageously left Haran, and via some years of hardship in Egypt, they have now arrived, but can they now trust God to play his part and provide them in their dotage with a son?

Sarah laughs at the prospect. But the challenge hangs in the air: “Is anything too hard for the Lord?”

It is strange how many people of faith feel fairly confident in themselves about what they can undertake for the Lord, but have grave doubts about God’s ability to live up to his side of the bargain.

ii

Paul has been on a similar journey of faith to that which Abraham and Sarah have embarked. Paul too was initially keen to show God what he could do to defend God’s honour and crush the rebellious Christians. On the Road to Damascus, Paul had discovered he must stop trying to do it all himself and accept that the initiative lies with God. Paul had to find his place within God’s scheme, rather than presume a weak and threatened God must find a supporting role in his plans.

Paul speaks of the peace and joy of faith in Christ. Now even suffering has been transformed from being a potential cause for doubting God’s ability to step up to the mark into just another opportunity for spiritual growth and maturity.

What has caused this new, rock-solid faith in God? It is the death and resurrection of Jesus. Christ died just at the right time, while we were still sinners. So if God can bring Christ back to life again we have a clear and dependable answer to that question left hanging in Genesis: “Is anything too hard for the Lord?”

In the light of the resurrection there is no need ever again to doubt God’s willingness and ability to act. This is a lesson we could all take to heart more than we do. It would prevent mountains of wasted worry and wasted activism on our part.

Faith isn’t just about doing your duty to God; it is also about trusting God to do his part too. ”Is anything too hard for the Lord?”

iii

Clearly, there is nothing “too hard for the Lord” when we see Jesus’ progress through the neighbourhood in Matthew 9:35 when he “healed every disease and sickness”.

Jesus then sends his twelve disciples out on mission with the same Spirit “to heal every disease and sickness” (Matthew 10:1).

The disciples have a vital part to play in the bringing in of the kingdom; but playing your part is not the same as thinking you have to play your part **and** fill in for God too.

The instructions to go on mission without extra food, tunic, sandals, or money are tests of their faith. They have witnessed Jesus’ triumphal progress through the neighbourhood, but now he is sending them on their own; would Jesus make their mission successful, or had they better plan for failure and have their own back-up ready?

Opposition to the message is not a sign that God has abandoned you to cope on your own. Indeed, trust God to use the opportunity to witness through you and give you the words you need (Matthew 10:19). Neither is the strife you stir up between those who receive the gospel and those who reject it a sign that God has abandoned you and you must cope in your own strength, for Jesus endured the same mixed response (Matthew 10:24-25).

Even when your life is in peril, do not take this as evidence that God has abandoned you and no longer at work through you. Do not fear those who can only kill the body, says Jesus (Matthew 10:28-29).

So even when things seem to be going terribly badly, there is opposition, there is trouble and argument dogging your every footstep, and even when you are in danger yourself, do not take any of this to suppose that God is not still at work in you and through you.

There is never going to be a moment or a situation in which you have to step up and play God because God is no longer up to the job. You are never going to need to make up your own new version of the gospel because God’s version has lost its power; you are never going to need to cut a deal with your generation to find some accommodation with them that at least enables you to hold on, in the hope that one day God might get back on the job again; you are never going to need to swap allegiance and take the world’s side in order to save your skin because God can no longer be trusted for ultimate victory.

It’s a lesson men and women of faith have had to learn since the days of Abraham and Sarah. Yet time and again, we have compromised with evil, lost hope, or taken charge in God’s supposed absence and each time it has crashed around our ears.

In our Methodist tradition, Wesley had to go through a similar experience before he became really useful to the Lord.

He was full of zeal, trained from his mother’s knee in matters of the Spirit, tutored at the finest university and eagerly went forth to convert the Native Americans of Georgia. Unfortunately, he had put himself in the driving seat and put God in the back seat.

Only after several painful months of waiting on God, after Peter Boehler told him in February 1738 upon his return to London in defeat and despair, to ‘preach faith until you have it’, did Wesley eventually allow God to take back control on 24 May 1738 and set his life off in a new and more fruitful direction. Wesley’s joy then sprang not from his astounding success, but from the joyful realisation that he could depend on God to be at work in him and through him. That putting God back in the driving seat, God would actually pick up the reins!

It had been a painful lesson for Paul to learn too on the Road to Damascus. It is a lesson Abraham and Sarah still had to learn. I think Abraham had decided God wasn’t capable of fulfilling his side of the bargain and that is why he took Hagar and had a son through her. One day, Abraham too would learn the lesson that God’s promises are dependable – and when a son is promised, a son is given.

If only we could live as if God can and will live up to his promises, we would save ourselves a lot of needless anguish. Not to mention our or others’ sceptical laughter.

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