

Sermon

Sunday 14 June 2020
First Sunday of Trinity

Lesson

Genesis 18: 1 – 15

Our lessons today from the Book of Genesis and the Gospel of St Matthew take us into the mysterious, if not, mystical experience of being *called* by God. We may think of a dramatic dazzling light suddenly appearing from heaven and surrounding Saul the Pharisee on the road to Damascus. We may think of the haunting silence through which the call of the LORD was heard three times by the boy Samuel who, in the deep darkness of night, was ministering in the temple. Or we may think of the word of the LORD that came to the prophet and priest Ezekiel by the river Chebar in the Babylonian land of the Chaldeans. He saw a whirlwind come from the north, a great cloud, fire and a tremendous brightness. The descriptive language of Scripture is colourful, evocative and truly memorable. If we read these magnificent texts with an open heart, we too will feel their potency and be touched by the Divine Spirit within them.

In our Old Testament lesson we read of the three angelic visitors to Abraham. On the plains of Mamre, in the scorching heat of the midday sun, Abraham sat in the shaded doorway of his tent. On lifting up his eyes, he saw three men approaching. Without delay, Abraham ran to greet them, bowed before them, brought water for their feet, cake by way of welcome, and arranged for a tender calf to

be prepared for a meal. Three men or angelic visitors were a vision or manifestation of the LORD which changed the course of human history. In the Jewish tradition, Abraham is *Avraham Avinu*, our father Abraham. In Islam, he is 'Ibrahim Khalilullah' meaning 'Abraham the Beloved of Allah'. In the parable of Jesus, the beggar Lazarus is carried by angels into heaven and embraced by 'Father Abraham'. Abraham is commemorated in the Coptic Church and in the Eastern Orthodox Church as the 'Righteous Forefather Abraham'. In the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church, the patriarch is known as 'our father in Faith'. He is the patron saint of the hospitality industry because of his generous welcome of the three visitors.



It matters not whether Abraham is an actual historical character or, as some scholars suggest, a composite figure. Written between 500BC and 200BC, the captivating story of Abraham is a spiritual story. Like so many stories in Scripture, the meaning is hidden in the marrow of the text. Within the wider Jewish and Islamic traditions, there is a birth narrative about Abraham, a portent in the stars which is seen by astrologers. Nimrod orders the killing of all new born babies but Abraham's mother escapes into the fields and gives birth secretly. Set later in his life, Abraham is cast into a large, consuming fire by Nimrod but is saved by God (picture). In the *Tanakh* (Jewish Bible) and Christian Bible,

it is Isaac who is nearly sacrificed by Abraham. However, in Islam, it is Abraham's first son, Ishmael. Ishmael is believed to be the father of the Arabian people.

Abraham 'saw' God through the three men. Read imaginatively, we are not to think of three winged beings; the weary, sand-blown travellers are a symbol of spiritual encounter. In the Book of Hebrews, the unknown author wrote, 'Let brotherly love continue. Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares'. On the Road to Emmaus, Cleopas and his friend met the Risen Christ and through the unfolding of Scripture their hearts burned: read symbolically, they encountered Jesus on their inner journey. The great Glasgow preacher, George Herbert Morrison (1866 – 1928), 'Morrison of Wellington', said that:

God is to be sought and found in the secret places of the soul. Not in the outward world, however beautiful, is the true vision of God to be attained. Sunrise and sunset and the evening star – these are but the outskirts of His ways. It is in the soul within us, in the hidden sanctuary, in the silence and secret of the human heart that the union which is true blessedness is won, and the vision is granted which is peace.

If Saul, Samuel, Ezekiel and Abraham had not been open to the possibility of 'hearing' or 'seeing' the Eternal, had not in their own hearts been searching for something deeper, more profound in life



than everyday intercourse, their lives would have remained unchanged, unilluminated. In the famous Victorian painting, *The Light of the World*, the artist Holman Hunt has Christ standing at the door, knocking. The keen-eyed observer will notice that there is no handle on the outside of the door. It can only be opened from the inside. Hunt said that Christ cannot enter into a mind ‘obstinately shut’. Highland Christians, crofters on the Hebridean islands,

had a strong tradition of ‘seeing’ the Presence every day. In prayer, they said:

God to enfold me,
 God to surround me,
 God in my speaking,
 God in my thinking.

God in my sleeping,
 God in my waking,
 God in my watching,
 God in my hoping.

God in my life,
 God in my lips,
 God in my soul,
 God in my heart.

In these days of racial tension, violence and injustice, I am reminded of the hatred and threats faced by the Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr.

Once he became part of the leadership of the Montgomery bus protest, he began to receive hate mail and disturbing phone calls.

King wrote:

After a particularly strenuous day, I settled in bed at a late hour. My wife had already fallen asleep and I was about to doze off when the telephone rang. An angry voice said, 'Listen, Nigger, we've taken all we want from you. Before next week you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery.'

King could not go back to sleep. He paced the floor and then went to the kitchen. In a state of exhaustion with his courage fading, King bowed his head as he sat at the kitchen table. He said:

At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before experienced him. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice, saying, 'Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will Be at your side forever'.

For King, the external circumstances of his situation had not changed but he came to believe that God had given him an inner calm.

As followers of Jesus in Scotland and within the sober Presbyterian tradition, we are not naturally inclined to speak personally of 'experiencing' or 'encountering' God or say that, with the ear of the heart, we have heard the voice of God. Nevertheless, we ought to let the sacredness of nature's beauty, the sweet solace of Scripture and

the wise counsel and unexpected kindness of stranger and friend to be God's voice, God's calling, and God's comfort.

Amen.

Abraham 40 years, like Mohammed, Moses on Mount Sinai (40 days), Jesus in the desert: spiritual maturation, second half of life.