

Homily for Lent 2, 2016

Genesis 15:1-21

'Abram's faith'

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TEXT – Genesis 15:1-21

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.'² But Abram said, 'O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?'³ And Abram said, 'You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.'⁴ But the word of the LORD came to him, 'This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.'⁵ He brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.'⁶ And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

⁷ Then he said to him, 'I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.'⁸ But he said, 'O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?'⁹ He said to him, 'Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon.'¹⁰ He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two.¹¹ And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

¹² As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.¹³ Then the LORD said to Abram, 'Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years;¹⁴ but I will bring judgement on the nation that they serve, and afterwards they shall come out with great possessions.¹⁵ As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age.¹⁶ And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.'

¹⁷ When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.¹⁸ On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites,²⁰ the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim,²¹ the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.'

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INTRODUCTION

Today we consider Abraham, or *Abram* as his name still was at this stage. As I was studying his life again this week I was amazed and astounded by the story of Abraham. He was called from obscurity at 75 years of age and given astounding promises. He waited decades for these promises to come to effect. Finally he was given a child of his own but asked to do the unthinkable. One person I read summarised Abraham's life in the following memorable way:

God came to Abram at 75 years old and said 'go!' Abraham said 'where?' God said, 'I'll tell you later, just go'. God came to Abram later and said 'I'm going to give you your own land'.

Abraham said *'where?'* God said, *'I'll tell you later, just wander'*. God came later to Abram and said *'I'm going to give you child'*. Abram said *'how?'* God said, *'I'll tell you later, just wait'*. Then finally after 25 years of waiting, Abraham and Sarah had a child. The promises seemed to be coming true. Then God came to Abram and said, *'Offer your only son as a sacrifice'*, Abraham said *'why?'* God said, *'I'll tell you later, just go up the mountain'*.

It's not for no reason then, that the New Testament points us to Abraham as the man of faith. So let's dig down a bit deeper and learn more about this faith of Abraham. We'll look at three things. First let's look at *'how his faith has room for questions, doubts and fears'*. Second we'll look at *'how his faith was strengthened **by** and rested **on** God's promises'*. Then third we'll look at *'how his faith receives God's covenant of grace'*.

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FAITH WHICH HAS ROOM FOR QUESTIONS

So first, faith which has room for questions, doubts and fears.

As I said, Abraham is held up to us in the New Testament as something of a model of faith, especially in Romans and Hebrews, but he gets other honourable mentions too. And as we hear of the incredible things he had to endure and the times he had to wait, we surely marvel at his faith. Perhaps we wish our faith were as strong as his. Sometimes we do this with other people we know as well. We look and we say, *'I wish I could have faith like them'*. Faith which never seems to have doubts, never seems to have fears, never seems to have questions. But as we look more closely this morning in this passage we see that this is not the sort of faith that Abram - the hero of faith - had.

God had promised Abram that he would become a great nation. But years had gone by and still he had no child. The biological clock was well and truly ticking. In fact the clock wasn't ticking at all anymore. The biological clock was finished, done, on the rubbish heap.

And, God had promised him that he would possess this land. Yet Abraham still didn't own square metre to call his own. Not to mention the fact there were other people living in the land who didn't seem to be planning to move out anytime soon.

So he **asks** God, *'O Lord God what will you give me?... I continue childless... A slave in my house is going to be my heir...'* Gen 15:2

In other words: *'How is all this going to work?' 'I'm supposed to be a great nation but I don't even have one child.'* I think we can hear Abram genuinely wrestling with what God's promise meant for him and if perhaps he had misinterpreted it. I can almost hear him saying: *'I'm trying to figure this out God. Perhaps you didn't mean I was actually going to have a child of my own? Perhaps it will be this servant in my house who will be like my adopted son? Maybe then he'll inherit what is mine? Perhaps it'll be through him that fulfil your promises?'*

Then the same dynamic is happening with the promise of the land. Abram's saying to God: *'I hear you loud and clear that you've promised me this land'*. But, *'how am I to know...?'* Abram says, *'how am I to know?'* Now doesn't this sound more like the life of faith we know.

Although Abram is the man of faith, he shows us that true faith is not without questions, not without doubts, not without fears. In fact, God seems to invite this. Did you notice how before Abram had said anything God spoke to him and said: *'Do not be afraid, I am your shield, Your very great reward'*. Almost as if to say: *'I know you're struggling to trust in the midst of all this, so tell me about it'*. So Abraham does.

True faith is not without questions, doubts and fears. These experiences are part of faith. But faith **brings** them to God, and **talks** to him about it. Faith is willing to say to God: 'I trust you God, but I don't understand how this is all going to work out. I trust you God, but I can't possibly see your good plans and purposes here in my life at the moment.' Abram here shows us something we see a lot of later in the Psalms of lament or complaint. We can get a false picture which sees true faith as something which would never lament or complain to God, whereas in fact lament and complaint to God is actually a deep expression of faith itself. Because it's really looking to God as ultimately the only one who can actually help.

This lesson of Abram's faith is perhaps best summed up by the desperate father in the Gospels who says to Jesus, *'Lord I believe, help thou my unbelief'*. That's the faith of Abraham. That's our faith too. So Abraham's is a faith that has room for questions, doubts and fears.

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FAITH WHICH RESTS ON GOD'S PROMISES

The next thing we see is that Abram's faith is one which is *strengthened **by*** and *rests **on*** God's promises.

So in the midst of these questions, doubts and fears, what is the antidote? Does Abram need to look deep down inside himself and simply muster up more faith? Does he need to pull himself up out of this by sheer willpower? On the contrary, faith is strengthened only from the outside in. *'The word of the Lord came to him...'* God speaks. And God speaks a word of promise to Abram. *'This man shall not be your heir; No one but your **very own son** shall be your heir'*.

At first we might hear this as reassurance of the promise that had come earlier. But actually there's something new here. Before the promise had simply been that Abram would be a great nation, but there was not detail about how God would do this. The assumption was that it would come from his own child, but over the years he begins to wonder about that. Later on he and Sarah continue to struggle with that as they take matters into their own hands, trying to help God along a bit by using their servant Hagar as something of a surrogate. But here God's word of promise comes to him and it's very clear and specific: *'your very own son'*.

As if that wasn't enough, God 'ups the ante' as he says: *'Look at the stars in the sky Abram. You're worried that you have got one child. Try to count the stars Abram, "so shall your descendants be"'*. It's this word of promise that lifts Abram out of the doldrums that he's in. It stirs up and creates the faith he needs. And that faith - that active trust - *rests* in that promise of God. So that 'Abram believed the Lord, and it was counted to him as righteousness' Gen 15:6. In other words Abram was right with God not because of anything he did, but because he trusted in the promise of God to him.

So it was for Abram, so it is for us. God's word of promise comes to us and strengthens our faith and our faith rests in that promise. For Abram his faith was in that specific promise of a future son to come. St Paul says in Galatians that this future son of Abraham ultimately points to Christ himself, and in Romans 4 he speaks to this as well: *"...the words "it was counted to him as righteousness", were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses, and raised for our justification."* Rom 4:18-25

Abram, along with all the Old Testament saints, put their trust in the saviour to come. We are called to put our trust in the Christ who has come. Jesus who died for your sins and was raised from the dead to make you right before God. Our faith rests in him and his work, the promise of what he has accomplished.

One thing worth bringing in here which is a very simple and practical thing, is that in Hebrew the word for believing is closely related to the word for 'Amen'. So very practically speaking in the Old Testament, what is it to believe and have faith? It is to hear what the Lord says and say 'Amen'. Practically one of the ways we exercise our faith is by coming to church and hearing again and again that God forgives our sins for Jesus sake and saying 'Amen'. In the midst of doubts, fears and questions we say to God *'Amen, yes I believe. I do not have what it takes in myself so I'm putting my trust in your word of promise to me.'*

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FAITH WHICH RECEIVES GOD'S COVENANT OF GRACE

So we looked first at how Abram's faith had room for questions, doubts and fears. Then we saw how Abram's faith was strengthened by the promises of God and rested in them. Finally we want to look at Abraham's faith which **receives** God's covenant of grace.

This is where we get to look at this very strange ceremony involving animals being dismembered and so on. At least it seems strange to us modern people. So what's going on here? We're told right at the end what is going on when it says: *'On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram...'* This ceremony is the making of a covenant. So what's a covenant?

It's basically like a contract or a treaty. It's a legally binding agreement where promises are made. We're told this is the making of a covenant. But then the question is: in what way does this strange little ceremony make a covenant? What's the significance of doing it this way? Why couldn't they have just shaken hands or signed on the dotted line like we might?

What's going on here is that God is using quite a common practice in the ancient world, but like God do often does, is putting his own spin on it. The common practice goes like this: to make a covenant two parties go to a sacred place so it's made in the presence of God, and sacrifices are made. By the way, if you look up these animals God asks for there are connections here to the later sacrificial system described in Leviticus. So the animals are sacrificed, cut into two, and either the lesser party walks through between the two pieces or both parties of the covenant walk through together. When that happens they are in effect saying: *'If I break the terms of this covenant, may what has happened to these animals happen to me'*. So to make a covenant like this is literally to put one's life on the line.

But what's the amazing thing that happens here that no one would expect? God alone, walks through! This smoking fire pot and flaming torch, which brings to mind things like the smoke and fire around Mt Sinai, or the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire, this indicates the presence of God. This is God walking through the pieces. Not just Abraham the lesser party in the covenant and not just God and Abraham, but God himself, walking through the pieces saying to Abraham and to us: *'I am making this covenant promise to you and I stake my very life on it should I fail to deliver on my promises.'*

And just in case we don't get the point that is a covenant of grace from God to Abraham which has nothing to do with his contribution, what's Abraham doing during all this? He's in a deep sleep, completely passive, receiving God's covenant of grace.

This is your God who commits himself to you. The God who comes to us to make things right because we can't and won't come to him.

After this, through the rest of the Old Testament, we hear of God's people turning away from him and risking their relationship with God. But then we hear words like these *'And God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob...'*. Right up until old Zechariah in the temple. God put his life on the line in this covenant. And although he didn't break the covenant, we his people did. And since God himself was the only one who walked through the pieces, He needed to take the curse of the broken covenant on himself.

'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"'. Gal 3:3.

As God made this covenant with Abram a deep and terrifying darkness descended. As the Son of God hung on a cross for us, that darkness descended again for three hours. This is why on the night before he died Jesus had taken a cup and said, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood'. He took the punishment for our breaking of the old covenant, and He institutes for us the new covenant of grace in his shed blood for the forgiveness of sins. Abraham wanted something tangible to reassure him in his faith - a sign. In the Lord's Supper you have your tangible sign, wherein you actually receive the body and blood of Christ. So that when your faith waxes and wanes, You can come here and listen to the word of promise and say again 'Amen, yes I believe'.

And you can look at this sign God has given us and say:

'He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?' Rom 8:32

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CONCLUSION

So that's the faith of Abram. It's a faith which has room for questions, doubts and fears. It's a faith strengthened **by** and resting **on** God's promises. It's faith which receives God's covenant of grace.

God grant it to us for Jesus' sake, Amen.