

St. Alban's Epping, 8th March 2020

“A FUTURE AND A HOPE”

(Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5,13-17; John 3:1-17)

You've probably seen many movies or TV shows with the scene-setting introduction. Even before the titles come up on the screen the crime has been committed, or the relationship is in crisis, or something else has happened which not only grabs our attention, but sets up the issue at the heart of the film, and introduces us to at least some of the main characters of the story.

The Bible has an introduction like that. Genesis 1-11 introduces us to God the creator, and then to Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, and the people of Babel. A series of crises, caused by people like us. Different situations, different kinds of narrative, but basically the same story. We are made in the image of God, but we keep choosing our own way, not God's way.

The fundamental problem is the problem of human sin. How can the problem be solved? Genesis 1-11 sets out this intractable problem, a problem which affects not only our relationship with God, but reaches into our minds and hearts, and into family life, and into communities, and has so many kinds of impact on our world.

It is clear that **we** can't fix the problem. But can **God** do anything effective to solve the problem? That story of the Tower of Babel makes clear that even the new start with Noah hadn't solved the problem. What can God do now?

The answer comes in Genesis chapter 12. You know the saying “today is the first day of the rest of your life”. Well, Genesis 12 is the first chapter of the rest of the Bible. It's not a particularly famous chapter, although it deserves to be better known. It's not even particularly dramatic. But it introduces one of the most important characters in the Bible. And it opens up a whole new era in the story of God and us, as God sets out to deal with the problem of human sin with both justice and love.

As we heard in our reading, Genesis 12 introduces Abram, whose name will soon be changed to Abraham, which is the name I'll use for him.

Abraham has already travelled as part of his family from the great city of Ur in Southern Iraq to Haran, in north-west Mesopotamia. But now the Lord says to him: “Leave your country, your people and your father's household, and go to the land I will show you.” Abraham does not know this land, which will involve a challenging journey of hundreds of kilometres, and there is only one reason why he would choose to go there. And that reason is that **the Lord has told him to go there.**

Abraham does go! He takes his wife and household and possessions, even his nephew Lot, and off he goes on this strange journey to an unknown land. It is an act of obedience. God has singled him out for an extraordinary task, and this man has obeyed God's call.

But God doesn't just issue a command to Abraham. He also makes him some wonderful promises. As we heard, he tells him, “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed.”

God will make Abraham a great nation: a nation that in fact will become God's own people. Whereas Babel became a community in revolt against God, Abraham's descendants will become a community of God's people. A great nation.

Also, **God will bless Abraham.** He will do good things for Abraham. He will care for him, provide for him, look after him. He will make Abraham's name great, so that others will recognize that God has blessed Abraham. To honour Abraham and his people will bring God's blessing, but to curse them, to dishonour them, will bring God's punishment.

One particular blessing is mentioned a bit down the track. When Abraham arrives in Canaan, God says to him: “To your offspring I will give this land.” **A land!** A place they belonged. A home. Abraham's people were not to be homeless nomads. They would have a homeland. God's place for them.

And God makes one more promise to Abraham. “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” Somehow through this one man and his descendants, **God's blessing will come to people throughout the world.**

Wonderful promises for Abraham. He would become a great people. His people would have their own homeland. God would bless him, and through him God would bless the world.

And that's really what the rest of the Old Testament is all about. It tells how Abraham actually had descendants, for at this point he and Sarah were childless, and they were already getting on. It tells how his descendants eventually came to occupy the promised land, as well as pointing out the difficulties they had holding on to it. It tells how God blessed them, but also how time and time again they refused God's blessings and they rejected God's will. And it tells of God's call to live as a holy people, showing something of God's righteousness to people round about, and of God's purpose that people of **other** nations should one day share in his blessings as well.

It a complex story all right. But behind it is the outworking, step by step, of God's plan to fulfil those promises he had made to Abraham: that plan to gather his people to himself in the place he had chosen, and to give them his blessings. Nevertheless, by the end of the Old Testament, that promise seemed a very uncertain thing. Perhaps God *would* finally give up.

Not at all! God knew all along how things would go, and he always had a deeper purpose behind his promises to Abraham. For he was indeed gathering a people for himself: not only the physical descendants of Abraham, but people who would be his spiritual descendants. And he had a chosen place where **all** his people would experience his eternal blessing: his perfect kingdom, experienced in a new heaven and a new earth.

And it was through a descendant of Abraham that these blessings would come to all people. Of course I'm talking about Jesus the descendant of Abraham, the Son of David, the Messiah, the promised king and Saviour of God's people. I'm talking about Jesus the unique Son of God himself.

All this amazing story is opened up by God's call to one man, Abraham, about 4000 years ago. Abraham obeyed.

And why did Abraham obey? **Because of his faith.** He believed God's word. He trusted God's promise. And so he did what God told him to do: he understood that this was the way to God's blessing.

And so even here, in Abraham's response, we see a thread which works its way through the Old Testament, and is clearly spelt out in the New Testament.

Faith has always been the response God seeks from his people. Perfection is not ours to offer.

But God calls us to listen to his message, to trust its reality, and to live on the basis of that faith and trust, even with our failures and frailties. It's what Abraham did. It's what God's faithful people did in the days of the Old Testament. And it's the way countless followers of Jesus have done over the centuries. Living by faith. Trusting God's promises. Opening up to God's blessings. And living our lives on the basis of God's word.

Faith has always been the response God seeks from his people. Not that faith is always easy. There is a story of a Christian minister who was taking his first aeroplane flight, and was extremely nervous. The passenger next to him was disturbed that a man in a clerical collar should be so panicky, as his white knuckles gripped the armrest in terror. "Sir, I'm surprised at you", he said. "A man like you shouldn't be so frightened. Don't you have any faith in God? Don't you believe that he is with you?" The clergyman looked across at his neighbour and said: "Look, the promise in scripture says, 'Lo, I am with you always.' It doesn't say anything about *high*."

Faith. Faith in the promises of God. Faith in the goodness of God. Faith in the purposes of God. And in that famous verse we heard from the Gospel of John, we heard of God's immense love for the world, shown in his gift of his only divine Son Jesus Christ for our salvation. How do we receive the gift of eternal life through Jesus? Through believing in him: through **faith**.

Paul in our reading from Romans brings it all together. We can't **earn** salvation by our good works, our religious activity, our respectable character. It is a **gift**. God offers it not to people who deserve it, but as a gracious gift. We accept that gift in humble faith.

The centrality of faith is seen in the life of Abraham, who believed God and acted on that belief. Faith is still central for us. We trust Christ. In faith we accept God's gift of forgiveness and eternal life. And we live lives of faith, seeking forgiveness as we fall short, trusting and following Jesus Christ, who brings God's wonderful promises to their fulfilment, and brings us true hope for eternity. Amen.

Paul Weaver

