



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on Sunday 28 February 2021

Readings: Genesis 17.1-7, 15-16 ; Romans 4.13-25 Mark 8.31-38

During Lent people often think about their relationship with God. Some are pretty pally with God; some prefer to keep God at a distance, to hold God in respect; and others cannot begin to think of how you could possibly have a 'relationship' with God. Today's readings offer us some interesting ideas about how we might what might characterise such a relationship.

The book Genesis doesn't tell us where Abram was when he had the encounter with God of which Paul read to us. But the next chapter says he was at home 'by the oaks of Mamre'. (18.1) Well, that's Hebron, in the Judean mountains – 3000 feet above sea level. Maybe that's why Genesis says Abram heard God described as *El Shaddai*, which some people think means 'God of the mountains'. Ancient people often thought their gods lived in the mountains – it made them mysterious and even a bit frightening. So our English Bibles often translate *El Shaddai* as God Almighty, a phrase which for some people keeps God where they want God to be, and for others make God entirely unappealing and unapproachable.

In today's story, Abram is given a more intimate experience of God. We're told the Lord said to Abram to 'walk before me'. That doesn't sound like a distant and alarming God, but one who wants to be in a relationship with Abram. Indeed, there are three places in the Bible where Abraham, as he becomes in our story, is described as God's 'friend'. (II Chronicles 20.7; Isaiah 41.8 and James 2.23)

Remember last week I was talking about repentance as being turning to face God? Well, maybe there's something of that idea in what Abram hears from the Lord: the Hebrew phrase which we translate as 'walk before God' can mean something like 'turn to face me', or 'live with a sense that you are in my presence, and so learn to trust me'.

The writer follows the command to 'walk before me' with another one: 'be blameless'. This is not about moral perfection – though that's not an unworthy aspiration. Rather this exhortation to be blameless is a development of the idea of living in God's presence. I think that here, to be blameless is about taking God seriously, about the place we give to God in our priorities. A human being's priorities will vary, depending upon who they are, what stage of life they are at, what burdens they are bearing. But what we can learn from the example of Abraham is that we were created to give God a high place in our lives, and that 'our lives are restless, till they rest in thee', as St Augustine bids us pray.

That's not about the theological ideas that we accept or the doctrine we believe. Giving God a high place - the highest place? – in our priorities is more usually about how we live. So circumcision, a rather gruesome thought really, is symbolic of what we are ready to *do* to express our faith, rather than what we say about it. After all, if you're anything like me, what you can and will *say* about God varies from one era of life to another, even from one day to another – such is the dynamic of living on the spectrum between creed and questions. Actions that seek to put God's love into credible action are far more reliable indicators of faith for most of us than are our words.

Even more importantly, Jesus' call in the Gospel reading to 'take up our cross' is about what we will do. Thinking about it, although his teaching matters greatly, Jesus's conviction was that taking up the cross was what he had to do to achieve what God wanted done.

Abraham had found that, too. God wasn't so much interested in what the old man said about God, as what he did to show his trust in God. So it is that when we are bidden to live out our discipleship by taking up our cross, it isn't urging us to be crucified, it's not even about enduring the inevitable pains of life – 'the cross we have to bear'. No, just as for Jesus the cross was doing what God needed doing, so it is for us to. To take up our cross is so determinedly to walk with God, that we will identify the thing we are good at, or could *become* good at, and making ourselves available to do it.

By a serendipitous chance, I am recording this sermon the weekend that members of Downing Place Church are asked to submit the names of those they would like to nominate as elders. As I write, thirty-one members have received the three or more nominations that mean I write to them to ask if they would be willing to accept the nomination and stand for election. Might eldership be the way that you can do what God needs doing as Downing Place Church prepares to inhabit its renewed space and serve God's mission in the city centre?

Of course, your cross might not be eldership – there are many other ways to live out our faith, some in the church and others in the community. The point here is that discipleship – that walking before God to which people of faith are called – is not a passive thing. True, there may well be seasons of life when it *is* passive, like when we are infirm or ageing. But authentic discipleship is today as Abraham found millennia ago. He is, after all our father in faith and as God's call was to him, so it is to us: walk before God and be blameless.

When Paul is writing to the Romans, his burden is to persuade them of the good news about Jesus Christ. That is emphatically not that we can buy our way into God's favour by what we do. It is that in Christ God has once and for all put us right with God, so that we can stand and face God knowing ourselves to be not faultless, but blameless. Blessed assurance! Knowing that, we then offer ourselves in grateful response – that is, the grateful response that will answer the love with which God redeems us by the love we show in our working lives, in our charitable roles for the neighbourhood, in our intimate lives, and in the church, too.

It maybe that we feel our faith is not strong enough to be a trusted servant of God. I've certainly heard many a person tell me their faith is not strong enough for them to be an elder. And if being a minister is about the stellar quality of our faith, then which of us could dare to do that? So what did St Paul mean, when, reflecting upon Abraham, he said: 'he grew strong in his faith *as he gave glory to God*'. I wonder if it means that our good works offered as a response to God's grace toward us will themselves grow and strengthen our faith? We do good works to glorify God because of the good work God has done for us, by grace, through Christ, and as we do that so our trust in that good work of God grows greater. Just as in a marriage – that is, an active relationship - the couple learns to trust one another, so in lived-out discipleship we learn to trust God. And that, for me, is the essence of the relationship into which God invites us as we hear God say, walk before me and be blameless.'

May it be so.