



**Sermon preached by Revd Chris Baker on 7<sup>th</sup> August 2022**

**Readings:** Genesis 15.1-6; Hebrews 11.1-3, 8-16; Luke 12.32-40

Dr Ira Byock, a palliative care doctor in America, presents us with this scenario - Imagine that you were in a car accident one night and knew you were about to die. What would be the things you wished you had said to your loved ones while you had the chance? Dr Byock suggests there are only four things that we really need to say to people:

Please forgive me.      I forgive you.  
Thank you.                I love you.

When we're young we hardly think of the necessity of saying these things. We are young, the world is there before us, the world is our oyster. Well, maybe. But as we get older we may look back at things that have happened to us, things we have done, things we have said, things we have omitted to do or say, things that have caused embarrassment, or pain or worse. In truth we all have these moments, and they are reminders, as if we needed them, of the fact that we are none of us perfect, we all have our faults, you, me and father Abraham.

As we heard in our readings from the Scriptures, Abraham is held up as an example of faith, and indeed he had his moments. The Lord told him to leave his homeland and go to a land which would be revealed to him in time. The Lord told him he would become a great nation which was a wonderful thought. One wonders about the discussions, even arguments, he might have had with his family, but they gathered up all their possessions and set out on their epic journey. When they travelled through Canaan the Lord told Abram (as he was known then) that his descendants would inherit that land, which was reassuring but there was not yet any sign of any descendants. However there was a famine in Canaan so they travelled on down to Egypt. Now Abram was a bit worried about being there and as his wife was beautiful he thought that some Egyptian would take a fancy to her and kill Abram to get her. So he passed her off as his sister. Well now, you know the story. Pharaoh's civil servants at border control, saw Sarai's beauty and reported it to Pharaoh who called for her to be brought to him. Thinking she was single he took her into his palace and Abram was richly rewarded with sheep and goats and donkeys and slaves. But it wasn't right. Pharaoh and his house were struck down by a plague. Pharaoh blamed Abram for his deception and he, with his wife and all his new wealth, was driven out of Egypt. But Abram still had no offspring which must have made him wonder, even doubt God's promises. Perhaps in Egypt he had blotted his copy book. Perhaps his behaviour in Egypt had made him forfeit the promises. He might have thought on what he had done wrong, and grieved. And then he had a vision. The Lord said that he was Abram's protector and the best was yet to come. Yes, said Abram, but we've still not got any children. And the Lord told him to look at the stars. There was no light pollution; he could see the heavens in all their glory. And the Lord said, You see all these stars. Your descendants will be as numerous as they are. And Abram believed him. God had promised him wealth, and he was a wealthy man. God had promised him a land, but he was still wandering around. God had promised him many descendants, and there was no sign of them yet, but Abram believed the Lord. And the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. Strange word that -righteousness. It's connected with justice. The Jewish Study Bible translates it as merit. Somehow, Abram's faith in God put him in a right relationship with God, an example for ages to come.

So what do WE mean by faith? Many years ago now a video was produced about the United Reformed Church. If I remember rightly it was produced by the Southern Province (as it was

called then) and it gave a picture of the various activities and work and life of the United Reformed Church. The commentary was provided by John Cole who was the Political Editor at the BBC. I'm sure some of you will remember it. In many ways it was a good introduction to our church except for one unfortunate interview. In this interview someone said that what they liked about the URC was that you could believe what you liked. As you can imagine, that caused a certain amount of controversy and the video was withdrawn. It is true that we don't make a statement of faith at every service; indeed we don't do it very often. It is true that we acknowledge the ancient creeds of the Church: the Apostles' and the Nicene Creeds. But it also true that people will interpret those creeds in their own ways. Over the centuries nonconformist traditions have produced their own statements of faith such have been brought together in David Thompson's book 'Stating the Gospel'. Some of these are lengthy, profound and fascinating. Probably few people have actually read them, our public declarations of faith usual boil down to a professed belief in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But of course, the faith that we are talking about is not a belief in a written document, however wise and profound that may be. So we may dig a little deeper.

In due course Abraham and Sarah had their descendants and through the Bible we can trace their growth. I'm using big brush strokes here at the risk of painting a caricature of the situation. But their knowledge of God was vague for their world was inhabited with many gods. When eventually Moses is confronted by a burning bush he was aware of a divine presence but he had to ask who it was. What is your name, that I can tell my people who you are? And such name as he was given left many questions. But gradually the people came to gather around this one God. They received the Ten Commandments which told them something about the nature of this God and the sort of society he wanted for them. And gradually they became the people of the Law. It shaped their thinking so, for example, in Psalm 15 the description of a person who could dwell on God's holy mountain was one who behaved in a particular way, who was truthful and bore no malice, one who walked blamelessly. And much later Isaiah could say that when God's law would prevail on earth, then everyone would learn what justice is, would learn about righteousness. So this religion, this faith stood out against the evils and corruptions of the world. And Jonathan Sacks, who you may remember was the Chief Rabbi for Britain and the Commonwealth for some years, could declare even now that Faith is protest. Protest against the world that is, in the name of the world that is not yet but ought to be. He writes, *I remain in awe at the challenge God has set us: to be different, to be God's question mark against the world until it becomes a place worthy of the divine presence, because we have learned to honour the image of God that is humankind. Biblical faith demands courage, it is not for the faint-hearted.*

He's right there. And he's right about the protest. Paul, writing to the Romans is talking about bringing people together and experiencing the peace of God. But those Romans could argue, *But we have peace, peace throughout the empire.* And indeed there was but it was a peace achieved and maintained by brutal force. That was the way of the world and when a rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, spoke of a loving God, and lived in a loving way, bringing hope and healing, is was seen as a protest, a challenge. He challenged tradition among his own people trying to get them to see behind and beyond the laws which for some had become crippling. Trying to get them to see beyond the rules and regulations to grasp the wonder, the glory, the greatness of the God they worshipped.

Trying to set them free from the restrictions of the world, to be able to rejoice and revel in the love which God had for them. Just a few caught the vision but human power sought to silence him. That brutal force which lay at the heart of the empire, which lay at the heart of humanity was brought to bear on him. And he was taken out of the city of Jerusalem, to the scrap heap

where he was crucified. They had tried to snuff the protest out but it didn't work. It couldn't work. Because that man was the Son of God. So you see, God did not wait until this place was worthy of the divine presence, he did not wait until we learned to honour the image of God that is humankind. Perhaps he could not wait that long and so he came in Jesus Christ and as the brutal power crushed his life, he took it, absorbed it, and rose triumphantly on Easter Day.

The power, the brutal power is still here, dominating our world. Some would say it was there in the 19th Century in imperialism. Again it was the 20th Century in totalitarianism, and in the 21st Century in terrorism. We see it in the power of vast business empires which can ride roughshod over national interests, seemingly beyond the law, untouchable. And the followers of Jesus Christ, women and men of faith, stand to protest, to challenge, to proclaim a different way. And we do it in the strength and power of God.

Before he died Jesus took his friends to an Upper Room, to share a last meal with them. It was a strange atmosphere which worried and frightened them. It was Passover and they would have expected shared cups of wine but Jesus gave this cup a new meaning. He broke bread and gave that a new significance too. They were to represent his ... his life, his body and blood. His disciples were being offered his life, even Judas Iscariot who handed him over to the authorities. And we repeat this custom, this tradition, to this very day and Jesus still offers us his life. Will we grasp it? Dare we seek to live it? What he offers has been described as a Spirit transplant. For he comes to us and challenges us. He may come as we sit here, or he may come when we least expect it, like a car crash in the night.

And what are we to say? Please, please forgive me. Thank you. Thank you for everything. And, with Peter, we say 'Yes, Lord, you know that we love you.'

So we rise up on the wings of faith. Not bound by a set of rules yet totally committed to walking in the ways of Christ. Not tied by ancient documents however worthy, yet open to their insights and wisdom. But rather we are lifted by faith in the Father, who has graciously become OUR father, lifted by faith in the Son whom we know to be our Saviour and Lord, lifted by the faith in the Spirit whom we know as helper and guide. It is a glorious faith, a wonderful relationship, a thrilling adventure which carries us through good times and dark times as we live with this personal relationship with the God of all. By grace, may the good God accept our faith and count it to us as righteousness.