

Abraham (Sermon 6)

Bible reading: Genesis 18

By
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In the book of Hebrews, towards the end, there's a tantalising little verse about hospitality; no doubt you've heard it,
it's Heb 13:2 – *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,
for by so doing
some have entertained strangers without knowing it.*

How appropriate that we should recall this on a weekend set aside for hospitality in St G's – I hope it will inspire us to action,
And, of course, how much more sense this verse makes, in the context of today's reading.

If ever there was a story to illustrate what the writer of Hebrews was hinting at, then surely, this is it.

Those who've been following this series will know that this is actually the 6th time that God has met with Abraham.

In the course of these visits (over 25 years), a partnership of friendship and trust has been growing. This time, for the first time, Sarah is included in the conversation.

As has been the pattern,

God chooses the time and place of the encounter,
this time, however, more than ever before,

Abraham takes the initiative.

In the course of *this* encounter we see just how much Abraham *has* changed.

The setting of the story is simple,
there's a tent, a tree, an old man and woman,
it's the middle of the day, it's hot, the couple is resting –
the middle-eastern version of the famous siesta.

And sitting there, dozing, Abraham looks up and sees 3 men standing on the edge of the camp.

Immediately, he springs to action, in fact Abraham is in more haste here than on any other occasion in the entire story of his life.

In a context where so much is routine and ordinary, such encounters were always seen as significant.

A stranger from another place brought news, stories, an opportunity to connect with the wider world.

As the writer of Hebrews reminds us, that wider world includes the wider world of God.

Now, we already know that God is involved in this story,
(that's clear in v. 1)

just exactly what Abraham knew at this stage is unclear, no matter, he is the perfect host.

The narrator spares no detail in laying out this delightful scene:
Abraham runs out to meet them; he bows and speaks:

*My lords, pray (please) if I have found favour in your eyes,
Pray do not pass by your servant!
Pray let a little water be fetched, then wash your feet and recline under the tree; and let me fetch
you a bit of bread, that you may refresh your hearts, then afterward you may pass on – for you
have, after all, passed your servant's way!*

The attentiveness of his hospitality is emphasised in the repetitious use of “pray” (please) and “pass by”,
and by stressing his urgency – twice he “runs,” three times he “hastens,” four times he “fetches.”
The appearance of these strangers is not seen as an intrusion,
but rather, as an opportunity.
In so doing, (very clearly, as it turns out here,)
Abraham does what the writer of Hebrews holds out as a poss. for us,
he honours and serves God.

Sometimes, doing something as ordinary as attending to the person before will prove to be
incredibly profound!

I wonder if we have this sense in *our* hospitality? At home? At church? Wherever?
Does visitors receive this kind of treatment from us,
or, do we sometimes *miss* something of God,
because we fail to notice the stranger in our midst?
That's a possibility worth pondering?

Well, the meal is prepared, the strangers are fed,
the conversation begins...
They said to him: *'Where is your wife?'*
'Here in the tent,' he said.
And one said, *'I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sara shall have a son.'*

At this point we get a little narrative insert...
We're told of Sara, listening on the inside of the tent,
we're also reminded of the age of our two protagonists.

And, just as Abraham had laughed at God's promise in the previous visit, so now Sara laughs to
herself – ‘impossible,’ is the gist of what she's thinking.

And God,
who seems to have no problem hearing inner thoughts,
speaks again: *Abraham, why does Sarah laugh and say: 'Shall I really give birth now that I am old?
Is anything too wonderful (too difficult) for the Lord?'*

It's phrased as a question here, but actually, it's a statement.
Indeed, it's one of the great affirmations of scripture.
We hear it again on the lips of the angel, promising a son to the virgin Mary.
It's a reminder, for all who would hear,
that when God promises something, no matter how unlikely,
it will be fulfilled.

God's promises are not jokes to be laughed at, says EP,
rather, they are maps to guide our walk of faith.

We may often catch ourselves laughing at divinely inspired dreams, at least initially, but may that never be our *final* response, rather, may our laughter confront us with our unbelief, and then lead us to a place of genuine trust and commitment. I tell you, this church won't be built on laughter, (although we've had a lot of fun so far), it will be built on faith and prayer, on generous belief and commitment.

I'm encouraged that God didn't punish Sara for her laughter here; no, he just named it, and in so doing, called her to something better – faith.

At this point, promise *and challenge* delivered, the 3 men leave for the escarpment overlooking Sodom.

In what follows, we get a rare, treasured insight into God's heart.

Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, God says, this partner enlisted for the blessing of the world.

And then the decision: *No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him, to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice... (19)*

In this fascinating insert, we see things from God's perspective, we God deciding to trust Abraham, just as Abraham is learning to trust God. This is what happens in a true partnership, There's a growing sense of respect, of trust, of mutuality, of vulnerability.

It reminds me of that verse in John 15, where Jesus says: *I do not call you servants any longer, for the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I call you friends for I have made known to you everything I have heard from my father.*

Folks, it's an enormous privilege that X has won for us – to be *in* on God's heart, then again, as Abraham is about to learn, it's also an enormous responsibility, for to be *in* on God's heart is to have an influence on God's decisions.

How *will* Abraham respond to his new found privilege? Will he squander it, copping out because it's complex, or, will he stand up and be counted - a true covenant partner?

At this point, amazingly, much as he does with us in Jesus, God humbles himself before Abraham respecting his contribution.

And, then, for the first time, as a true ambassador for the world he's being blessed to bless, Abraham, with heart in his mouth,

speaks up to intercede...

Well, you know the conversation,
as humbly as Abraham knows how, he pushes God,
respectfully probing the possibilities of justice,
the boundaries of divine judgment and mercy.

v. 23: And Abraham came close and said,
*'Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?
Suppose there were 50 righteous people in the city;
Will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the 50 righteous who are in it.
Heaven forbid, for you, the judge of the earth – will you not do what is just?'*

Note, Abraham isn't questioning the *rightness* of judgment here,
there is no question about that, Sodom is a rotten apple,
but,
what of those resisting the rot,
those who are trying, albeit falteringly, to live well?
What about them?
What's fair, what's true?

What if there were 50 *righteous* people in the city... what would you do then, you who are the *just* judge?

If I find 50 innocent people, I will bear the whole place for their sake, God says.

Ok, then, says Abraham, summoning all his courage: what about if there were only 45... or 40... or 30... or 20...?

What if there were only 10???

He doesn't dare to go any lower than this,
and yet, as I see it, God's mercy was showing no sign of flagging.
I wonder how far he *could* have gone?

One thing's for sure,
as Abraham is discovering here,
as *we* 've discovered so powerfully... so personally in Christ,
the divine scales are tipped very much in favour of mercy.

Folks, in a world saturated with violence,
in a world where vengeance and retaliation wreck havoc every day,
let us never forget that the longing of *God's* heart is for mercy...
no Abraham, even *for the sake of 10...I will not bring ruin.*

Yes, there *is* judgment, and thank God for it!
Who'd want a god who didn't care about Auschwitz or Rwanda?
Who'd want a god who didn't care about rape and child abuse and exploitation and poverty?
Yes, there *is* judgment, and thank God for it!

But thank God too, for mercy,
for without it... where would any of us be...?

Friends, it's a powerful story we've read today.
It reveals something very deep about the possibility,
about the privilege and *responsibility* of partnership with God.

To be *let in* on God's heart is to be invited to intercede for a world that *breaks* God's heart.

Before *we* can do that we must get to know the one who himself *made intercession, by bearing the sin of many (Isaiah 53:12),*
the one who (even now) *sits at the right hand of God,*
making intercession for us (Rom 8:38).

As we get to know this God,
as we share in his heart,
as we join with his people,
we will discover that of our core responsibilities is:
to make requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving for everyone (1 Tim 2:1).

Folks, let us not neglect this task,
inspired by Abraham, your intercessors, rise up!
Inspired by Abraham, may we all find new courage to come before God on behalf of the world.
And, inspired by *God,*
by God's generous sharing of God's heart and God's longing,
may we all practice *hospitality with hope,*
and justice *with mercy.*