

The People of God - call, choice and covenant

St John's and St James
Sunday 8th Aug 2021

Genesis 12:1-3 & 15:1-6
[Hebrews 11:8-12]
Mark 1:16-20

If you were in St John's/St James, or watching online, last Sunday, you will have heard Paul speaking about the series of sermons which will be preached between now and Advent, in which we will be thinking about the story of the relationship between God and human beings – the Big Picture story which we can plot out from the texts contained within the Bible.

And you'll have heard him speaking about the story of creation, and our responsibility to care for the world that God has made; and something about what it means that human beings – us, all of us – are made in the image of God. And how although we are tarnished images of God, Jesus is the perfect image of God in human form. Because that is who he is.

So this week, we pick up the story again a little further on in Genesis. Since we left God resting on the seventh day having declared that all that he had made was very good, we have skipped over the sorry tale of Eve and Adam and the serpent, in which human beings decided that they would prefer to do what they wanted, rather than what God advised; and seen that their actions excluded them from the beautiful place where they had lived in perfect harmony with God – the place which we call the Garden of Eden.

We have omitted the descent into anarchy which followed – the jealous murder of Abel by his brother Cain.

We have fast-forwarded through the story of Noah, the ark, and the arch - the rainbow sealing God's promise that he would never again send a great flood; the rainbow, which even today is seen as a sign of hope for a better future.

And we have completely by-passed the narrative of the city and tower of Babel – a poetic account of the origin of different languages and nations.

And we've reached the point where myth and poetry begins to give way to some form of very early history. At least to a time to which we can begin to assign a date. Something like 2,100 years before the birth of Jesus – to the story of Abram.

[Genesis readings]

I wonder how Abram experienced God's call? I wonder how Sarai did?

I wonder – was it a call like the one which we all dread – the one which comes in the middle of the night. “Come now, or....” The one which is filled with urgency and fearful expectation.

Was it a call like the one we long to hear? “It's a girl (or boy). They're both fine.” “I'm pleased to offer you the job...” The one which is filled with new beginnings. With prospects and opening horizons.

Or was it an altogether different type of call? A sense of growing conviction that this was what he needed to do? A restlessness that wouldn't let go – until he said “yes”? and meant it. And did something about it.

I'm guessing that it wasn't the dread-filled call – at least not for Abram. For Sarai his wife, I'm not so sure. The culture in which she lived didn't give her much say. The culture in which their story was told, and retold until it was committed to written text, didn't give much consideration to women. But without Sarai this story is going nowhere, and her voice and feelings cry out to be acknowledged.

In fact, I wonder if it was a “call” at all? “Call” is such an imperious word. It kind of gives the sense of no refusal. Whereas it seems to me that more often than not, God invites.

So God invites Abram and his family, and off they go – somewhere. This childless couple, no longer in the first flush of youth. They set off, following a promise that they will become a great nation, and that through them all the families of the earth will be blessed. Even when the years pass, and the prospect of children becomes so remote as to be laughable, they still hang on. Still trust that God, in his goodness and love and power, will bring what he has promised into reality. Still believe...

“And [Abram] believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness”

Righteousness is not exactly a word in common use these days. When it is, it carries connotations of some sort of super-piety – and not in a good way. But the Bible uses it to mean “in a right relationship with God.” “Blameless.” Someone who can know and receive God's love, God's blessing.

And so God chooses Abram and Sarai – or maybe we could say that in accepting his invitation they choose God - to receive his blessing.

And this blessing takes the form of a solemn commitment – a covenant. ‘Covenant’ is another word we don't use much these days. In legal terms it's an agreement. Or contract. Though a covenant is more like a will, in that one party offers it, and the other party has the option to accept or decline.

The covenant is that not only will Abram become Abraham, the “father of many”, and Sarai become Sarah, the mother of nations and kings – God has promised this already; but that also that God Himself will be the God of this family. A family which (given the ages of

Abraham and Sarah by this time) is clearly God-initiated and God-given, and which will grow and flourish and over time become a great people – the People of God.

And I expect you know the rest of the story. God appears to Abraham and Sarah in the guise of “three men” who promise that within a year, Sarah will have a baby. She laughs aloud at the idea, but sure enough, within 12 months, Isaac is born – the heir of the covenant. And when Isaac grows up he marries Rebekah, and they have twins called Esau and Jacob. Jacob is a wily type, who tricks his brother out of his inheritance – the inheritance of God’s blessing, the covenant. And Jacob it is, who, after many twists and turns, becomes the father of 12 sons, one of whom is Joseph – who sadly actually did not have a technicolour dreamcoat. Though he did have a very eventful life, of which we will hear more next week.

Call (or maybe invitation)
Choice.
Covenant.....

.... in the ancient near East
....over 4,000 years ago.

But, what might they mean to us, here, today?

Let’s stop for a moment and hear our gospel reading, and then we’ll try to answer this question....

[Mark 1:16-20]

So, the call of the first disciples...

Once again, here we have ordinary people; called – invited – by God to join in with him in his work in the world. Fishermen. Family men. No huge status or importance beyond their own small community. Ordinary – but important to God.

Just as in the OT story Sarai/Sarah is important, not just because through her womb Abram really does become the Father of Many Nations, but because she is a human being, made in God’s image – and because she too is a beloved daughter of God.

And maybe we tend to think about the call of the disciples in terms of the individuals involved – Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John. And so, on one level, it was – each one had to make their own decision. But we *could* also see it as the beginning of the new people of God, much as we have seen Abraham and Sarah as the beginning of the Old Testament people of God.

These men who responded to the invitation to become part of the group which was following Jesus. To be part of something. To be part of the community which had Jesus at its centre. A group of very disparate people who were united not because they were

respectable, nice, good, religious people who had life sorted – because they weren't (Matthew had been a tax collector for the occupying Romans, for goodness sake!). Not because they had passed lots of exams, or accrued lots of wealth – because they hadn't. Not even because they liked each other – because, actually, they often didn't. But because they had seen something in Jesus that gave them hope that another world was possible – that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was still alive and at work in the world.

As I said – the beginnings of the new people of God. Of whom we are the latest version.

So God called/invited Abram and Sarai into a new relationship with him. He invited his first disciples. He invites us too.

But, I wonder; how have we heard – or maybe “are hearing” his invitation to us? For God always invites us deeper. There is always more to discover of God.

I hope it's not a fearful “call” – the dread-filled experience I referred to earlier. Sadly the church has a long history of trying to frighten people into following Jesus – whether that's by threats of hellfire and damnation, or other less unsubtle ways. Sometimes the fear is more internal – “if I don't do this, then something bad will happen to me or someone I love.” Sometimes it's inverted, and looks more like bargaining “If I do this, then God will do that for me.” Hear the welcome in Jesus' invitation, see the love as Jesus stretches out his arms on the cross to deal with everything that keeps us from God. Yes – we need to take God seriously. No, we do not need to be afraid. He is Love.

Maybe we hear the “call” with joy and hope. Like the news of a new baby, or a new job. The news we want to share.

Or maybe it's a growing conviction, that the time is now. When I was training as a Reader I spent some time at the church in Yardley Wood, and met a guy who had just felt that he had to go to the Midnight service on Christmas Eve. And that was the start of his faith in God. Maybe there is an undeniable sense that God is inviting you to move forward in some way.

Maybe it is something else entirely.

But whatever, we have the choice to accept it – or not. We don't have to be ‘perfect’ – if you read more of the story of Abraham and Sarah you will realise that they were very flawed human beings. We don't even have to be particularly good – it is heartbreaking to hear people say that they are “not good enough” to come to church.

For just as God made a covenant with Abram and Sarai, that he would be the God of the nation that would come from them, in Jesus God has made a new covenant with human beings. He made it through his death on the cross, and we remember it every time we share in the Eucharist. This time one that is not dependant on who your father or mother is, but one which invites in everyone who chooses to believe – have faith and trust - in Jesus Christ.

So – people of God in Shirley – we stand in an awesome place. The Almighty God of heaven and earth looks on us in mercy and love and sees us as his people. People who worship him,

not just here in this building, but wherever we are, with the whole of our lives. People who are invited to know him more and more, people who are commissioned to take his love and mercy with us, wherever we go; to show that another world is possible; to show that God is still alive and at work in his world.

Knowing that in all we do, we will be his people, and he will be our God.