

## Blandford Forum - Sunday 23 September 2007

Rev Tim Storey

"Abraham - Father Of The Nation "

Genesis 12:1-8

How do you learn? If I was to ask everyone here how they learn best, I expect I would get many different answers. The answers depend on the type of character: I am an extrovert and so I best learn by being in a group where I can engage in conversation with the group and learn by testing my ideas against others and letting them challenge me. Introverts, on the other hand, much prefer to listen and to mull it around internally before coming to their own conclusion. It may not surprise you then to know that my character equates listening to a sermon to purgatory, so you have my deepest sympathies at the moment.

There are many different ways of learning, but there is a particular well known way to apply the theory gained and put it into practice. It goes along the lines of:

*I do - you watch.*

*We do together.*

*You do - I watch*

Look at the Gospels and you see how Jesus trained the disciples: They watched him and he worked with them and then sent them out in pairs until finally they were ready to work on their own, albeit with the Holy Spirit at their side.

Look at the way industry develops ideas and you will see a phrase which crops up over and over again: "roll out". A company will develop an idea and will test it among a small group before rolling it out to a part of the company and then, maybe, world-wide. Jesus started off with 12 people, and then developed it through the early church before rolling it out world-wide starting with his European MD, Paul of Tarsus.

And we are tempted to see that as the big picture: with the story beginning at Matthew chapter 1. If we do that, yes, we see the story of Jesus and, yes, Jesus is the focus of all we do. But what we fail to see is that Jesus didn't suddenly appear and everyone went "wow - I didn't see that coming!" Jesus came - and everyone was expecting him. Of course, what we know is even though they were expecting him, they didn't recognise him. And many Christians go "Dur - isn't it obvious?" and the answer is "yes - and no". To us, it is obvious - because we know what we are looking for, because we know the end of the story. But for those living it, it wasn't so easy.

What I am hoping we are going to be able to do over the next year is to look at the Big Picture: to see how Jesus fits into the overall picture of the Bible and how the story begins not at Matthew 1 but Genesis 1.

Genesis 1 - where God sets up everything as it is supposed to be, before Adam and Eve mess everything up. Last week, we looked at Noah. A man commended for his faith and a story which tells us a few things: Firstly, God got frustrated with his world after only six chapters of Genesis. God is holy and can't bear sin. And all these people he created, not just Adam and Eve, - all they seem to do is sin. Secondly, the World needs a Saviour. God decides to start over again but uses Noah as the one to keep the human race afloat. Noah is what theologians call a "type", someone who is an example of something. Noah is a type of Saviour: he is an all-round good bloke who has faith and obeys God. No, he's not perfect as a story later on in chapter 9 tells us, but, because God needs someone to do the job, he picks Noah and Noah becomes a "prototype" Saviour. Thirdly, God shows his love: at the end of the story he puts a rainbow in the sky and promises not to flood the world again.

Have you ever wondered why he said that? Do you honestly believe that God didn't know that 5 minutes after the Ark landed Noah and Co, and all their descendants would be just as bad as the lot who had just drowned? God didn't flood the world to make himself feel better because he had had a bad week and wanted to take it out on someone. Neither did he flood the world in the hope that everyone would say "Gosh, we've all been sinners - we won't be like that again!" God did it because he was hoping that the people on earth would sit up and notice a few things:

- That God is holy.
  - That we need a Saviour.
  - That God loves us and wants to make it happen.
- In other words, the flood was for our sake, not God's!

Now - I want to rewind a moment. I said earlier that a way of introducing an idea is to do it gradually, rolling it out to a bigger group, and then a bigger one still, until the world has grasped the idea. So God introduces the idea of judgement and Salvation in Noah and then looks to how he can roll it out further. And Abraham is the bloke to do it.

**Genesis 12:1 *The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."***

Right here's the deal: You obey me. You become the head of a big family organisation. And eventually, I will roll it out to the whole world. Simple as that.

Like Noah, Abraham is far from perfect: he tells Pharaoh that Sarah is his sister when, in fact she is his wife. (Genesis 12:12-20) There is the small problem that both Abraham and Sarah are OAP's and God has promised them a child, and he reminds them of his promises in Genesis 15. But Abraham loses his nerve so, in chapter 16 he bypasses God and has a baby with one of his maids, Hagar. Doing it this way may, indeed have been a socially acceptable thing to do, but God had told Abraham to trust him, and Abraham, being human had failed the test. But then Abraham begins to learn: God tells him that he and Sarah *will* have a baby and despite her laughter, they believe him and then, in Genesis 21, Isaac is born. God then tests Abraham in Genesis 22, by telling him to sacrifice Isaac and, as I am sure you remember, God stops him just as he is about to plunge the dagger into Isaac.

With Noah what we see is God introducing the ideas to us:

- That God is holy.
- That we need a Saviour.
- That God loves us and wants to make it happen.

With Abraham, what we see is the next part of the plan unfolding:

- That God wants a relationship with his world.
- That faith and trust are key parts to that relationship.
- That this relationship involves long-term learning.

We live in an "instant" world, where we get cross if the lights are against us or the Internet doesn't come up with the site we want immediately. And we want God to work the same way. But God's timing is often slow, slow in human terms, and there is a very good reason for it. We often work so fast, because we are anxious to get to our destination instead of sometimes just enjoying the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of the journey for itself.

The story of Abraham's life is one of discovery. It begins with an important statement. Genesis 12:1 ***The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country ..."***

We are looking back at the moment when it all began for Abraham and it is as though the writer of Genesis is saying ... "remember". Remember the clear instruction you got. Because the first aspect of Abraham's character and the opportunity that God has to use him was this: Abraham was listening for God. He was waiting by the phone. And when it rang - he followed the instruction. And that was before he lied to Pharaoh and doubted God - and had a baby with Hagar. At the start of the story, God is willing to use someone who is going to fail him. Just like God flooded the world, knowing that the new generation of people would fail him, God knew that Abraham would fail him. But God sticks with Abraham just as he stuck with Noah.

And Abraham learnt:

- he learnt that God could be trusted
- and that he could have a relationship with God
- that meant the learning carried on.

And, in Abraham's case, it took years and years and years. Decades, in fact. And on the way, it involved great doubts: Go to Genesis 15:1 ***After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars - if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.***

God didn't worry that Abraham doubted, but he was absolutely overjoyed when Abraham believed him. And yet, what do we read in the very next chapter: Genesis 16:16 ***Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.*** Abraham has already lost his faith in God.

Go on to Genesis 17 and God tries again; ***When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers."***

Hang on, says Abraham, things are getting to the point where this kind of thing is maybe, well, not one had in mind for retirement! But in Genesis 21:5, we read ***Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.***

With Noah, we see:

- That God is holy.
- That we need a Saviour.
- That God loves us and wants to make it happen.

With Abraham, we see:

- That God wants a relationship with his world.
- That faith and trust are key parts to that relationship.
- That this relationship involves long-term learning.

A simple question: Do you expect God to sort out your life today? In this instant world, we often expect God to sort it all out so that we can get on with living. And God says, "Hang on - I want you to stop. And I want you to notice a few things. And I want you to learn".

The Big Picture of the Bible is one of what we call "Revelation". God reveals things to his world, step by step, when they have grasped the last lesson and are ready to absorb the next one. Think about it - God could have sent Jesus to earth in Genesis chapter 4 when everything had gone pear-shaped (or apple-shaped). Why didn't he do it? Because we weren't ready. By Genesis 6, we were ready to understand that God is Holy, that we need a Saviour and that God loves us. By Genesis 12 we were ready to understand that God wants a relationship with his world, that faith and trust are key parts to that relationship and that this relationship involves long-term learning.

And, as we go on through the next 2000 years God shows us, step by step what we need to know so that we can see Jesus for who he is and what God wants to do through him.

A simple lesson for us: Don't try to get ahead of God. Learn the lesson he has for you *today* and learn it well, so that he can teach you another lesson *tomorrow*. And when we are ready, and have learnt the lessons which will prepare us, then, and only then, will we be ready to deal with the big issues. The Old Testament is full of stories of people saying: this is "the one". Because God sent along more prototype saviours like Noah and Abraham. It was only those who could see what the lessons God was teaching his world through people like Noah and Abraham who could then recognise the truth when God revealed himself once and for all in the person of Jesus Christ.

May that be the case for us.