

When I think of the great prophet Abraham, also known as Abram, some words immediately come to mind. CALL, PROMISE, JOURNEY, BLESSING, DESCENDANTS,

We read about Abram in the first reading today, Chapter 15 of Genesis. But we first read about Abram in Chapter 11 where we learn that Abram was married to Sarai (Sarah) and she was barren, ie she had no children. NOW KEEP THAT IN MIND BECAUSE IT IS A KEY TO UNDERSTANDING THE ENCOUNTER OF ABRAHAM AND GOD IN CHAPTER 15.

Abram first encounters the Lord, in Chapter 12, when God instructs Abram to leave his country and kinfolk and travel to the land that God will show him. This is the call of Abraham. God promises to BLESS Abram and to make him a great nation. This suggests that Abram and Sarai will have children. And God declares that through Abram all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Abram obeys the call of God and goes on the journey with Sarai.

And Abram is indeed blessed. He and Sarai travel to Egypt and they are welcomed into the court of the Pharaoh. I will leave it up to you to read the finer details of what happened in the court of the Pharaoh. But for the purposes of this homily the key thing to know is that during a time of famine Abram was doing very well, with livestock and slaves. Materially he was doing very well, he would have been considered to have been blessed by God. Indeed we are told in Chapter 13 verse 2 that Abram not only had livestock, but silver and gold.

In Chapter 13, verses 14- 16 God promises Abram the land of Canaan, but not only to Abram but to his offspring also. ONCE MORE WE HAVE THE PROMISE OF CHILDREN. Chapter 14 of Genesis deals with conflicts and wars in the region and their impact upon Abram and his nephew Lot. And in verse 19 of Chapter 14 Abram is blessed by Melchizedek, priest and king.

Which brings us to today's first reading from Genesis Chapter 15. We are told that the Lord came to Abram in a vision. God says "I am your shield; your reward shall be great". And up until now Abram has truly been protected by God, and blessed, bountifully, except for one thing: And Abram spells it out clearly: "what will you give me, for I continue childless.... You have given me no offspring and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir".

And God responds with a promise: your very own issue shall be your heir. God says look to the heavens and count the stars, so shall your descendants be. Abram would have been looking up into the clear desert sky, at the heavens in all their glory, with millions of stars twinkling. What a special moment this would have been.

And we are told in v6 "Abram believed the Lord. This is what we call faith. Because up until that time God's promise to Abram had not been fulfilled. There is risk involved in trusting again. What if God does not fulfil his promise. Now the text does not explore the deeper thoughts of Abram. But we all know of people who have felt so let down by God that they have become bitter and lost faith.

Any moment when we encounter God is a profound moment. And experiencing the presence of God, may have helped Abram to trust in God's word, and to believe in God, to give God another chance. The blessing that Abram will receive, offspring, will be the outcome of trusting in God. But Abram must first trust God; THAT IS WHAT WE CALL FAITH

If we read on over the next few chapters of Genesis we will learn that it was not smooth sailing as Abram and Sarai tried to conceive. I will leave it to you to read on in your own time.

What are the lessons for us from Abram's trust in God? Well firstly: Abraham is called Our Father in Faith. In verse 6 we are told that Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as RIGHTEOUSNESS. That is, Abram is in RIGHT relationship with God. Being righteous means to trust that the future is in God's hands and to live assured of that future even in the dark and difficult, even deathly present. It means to let go of a fear of being hurt or disappointed by God, to recommit again and again, to trusting in God.

Abraham is held up by St Paul, and other authors, in the New Testament writings as a model of faith. In Romans chapter 4, Paul argues that Abraham was righteous before God not because he kept the law, not because he did good works and not because he had been circumcised. Abraham was righteous because he trusted in God and continued to trust in God. And in the Letter to the Hebrews Abraham is held up as the model of faith, of saying yes to God.

LIFE IS COMPLICATED. YES. BUT FAITH IS NOT MEANT TO BE.
FAITH IS TRUST AND BELIEF IN A GOD WHO CREATED US AND
WHO DESIRES A RELATIONSHIP WITH US.

But life and all its pain can get between us and our relationship with God.

Yesterday we completed the second session of The Being With program. Being With is an opportunity to share in a small group about our reflections on life and God. The first topic was about meaning. And the commentary for the first session on Meaning suggested that for so many of us the present tense does not exist. Interesting thought. We are encouraged to live in the present. But for many people so much of their energy is focussed on the past or the future, that the present is but a fleeting moment.

We can't change the past, and we cannot control the future, as much as we would like to.

We cannot undo the past, but we can change how it impacts on us in the now. Here and now. We can be free from the prison of the past through forgiveness. Who do we need to forgive? Are we prisoners of resentment about how we were treated by other? Are we prisoners of our grief of how we acted in the past? Do we grieve now for what we used to have, stuck in nostalgia for how our lives used to be?

I would like to quote from the Being With commentary:

“Forgiveness transforms our past from an enemy to a friend, from a horror show of shame to a storehouse of wisdom”.

And what of the future: As Christians we believe in everlasting life. As you well know everlasting life does not dismantle the reality of death, suffering, bereavement but it does offer life beyond death, comfort beyond suffering, companionship beyond separation. If

we can trust in God, we can trust that death is not the end, and we can be freed to live in the now.

We can have faith that God has been with us in the highs and lows of the past. We can look to the future with trust. The present, what God embodies and makes possible, we call love. Without being imprisoned by the past, and fearful of the future, we can have so much more love and joy for the now.

The encounter between Abraham and God encompassed the past, present and future. The past for Abraham encompassed God's blessings and protection but also the grief and disappointment of not having children. Perhaps Abraham needed to forgive God. The future for Abraham required him to place his hope and trust in God, that in time God will be true to his word. And what of the present in that moment? Abraham, I believe, would have been touched by the love and majesty of God, who is eternal, and can do anything. That moment in God's presence may have been just enough for Abram to trust again.

Here we are, into the third week of Lent. This is our annual opportunity to reflect on our relationship with God, and with others. What of the past blocks us from better relationships with others, and a more trusting relationship with God? It is a time to commit our future into the hands of God.

Let us pray: Heavenly father heal us of all that blocks a deeper relationship with you. Help us to forgive, let go of the past hurts, but to embrace the lessons of the past. May we place our lives and hopes into your hands, in live more fully in your presence in the present time. We make this prayer in Jesus' name.