

Genesis 18:1-15

Romans 5:1-8

Matthew 9:35 – 10:8

Is anything too wonderful [impossible] for the Lord? (Genesis 18:14)

Sermon by Chris Mostert

[A] Introduction

Our readings this morning are about the *grace* of God and the *faith* in which we receive it and respond to it. ‘Justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ’, says the apostle Paul in the 5th chapter of the letter to the Romans. In the previous chapter he has used the figure of Abraham as the great model of faith: Abraham believed God; he believed that he would become the father of many nations (4:18).

But the story of the three visitors to Abraham does not portray Abraham as the model of *faith*; nor Sarah, who features prominently in the story. Their response to the outrageously improbable words of the visitors is one of *disbelief*! Sarah laughs at the news that she, well past child-bearing, and with a very old husband, will have a son. She might well have thought that it was a very poor joke indeed. Sarah’s laugh is ‘the laughter of disbelief’, as Walter Brueggemann describes it in his marvellous discussion of Genesis 18.

The question for us is whether we can be enticed out of our closed frameworks of thinking into a bold faith which is willing to reckon with *divine possibility* breaking out of human *impossibility*. The question is whether God is actually sovereign and free or whether God is really as powerless as we are to steer this world through its chaos and brokenness to its redemption. Abraham is asked whether anything is too wonderful for God, whether anything is impossible for God. How does the story speak to this question?

[B] The encounter

The story begins with the announcement that ‘*the Lord* appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre’. But it was three men who stood before him; and Abraham goes to some trouble to offer hospitality. The identity of the visitor (or visitors) is ambiguous. Is it the *Lord* or is it three men? The story moves between the two identifications, but it becomes clear that this is a story about a disclosure, a *divine* disclosure.

Some of you will know the famous icon by Rublev of the three figures in blue who are taken to represent the three Persons of the Holy Trinity. Actually, it’s an icon of the three visitors to Abraham from Genesis 18. The same ambiguity is present in the *icon* as in the story. The strangers make a highly surprising – indeed shocking – announcement: Sarah will give birth to a son. As things normally go in this world, it’s an absurd promise!

In the rest of the story a sharp tension is set up between God’s word of *promise*, which ought to be believed, and the *inability* of Abraham and Sarah to believe it. At one level, many of us would be sympathetic. How *could* you believe such a promise?

But we mustn’t be too crass about this. Faith is not primarily about believing *impossible things*: the more impossible, the more to be believed! That is not the level at which the text addresses us in the question to Abraham: ‘*Is anything impossible for God?*’

[C] Is anything impossible for God?

The question sounds abstract and speculative. It’s the kind of question students play with when they are discussing the attribute of *omnipotence*: can God do anything at all? Can God make a square circle? Can God do logically impossible things?

But in the context of this story it's a much more *existential* question. It is a question about *faith*, in particular faith as *trust*. It is a question about our view of the world: whether we see the world as a closed system – therefore also closed to God – or whether it is an open system. It is a question about the credibility of God's promises. What is at issue is what we believe about *God*. Is God truly *God*, the God in whose hands are all things, or only a pseudo-god, with no more power and credibility than the idol-gods of the nations?

The question whether anything is *impossible* for God is really the question whether our belief in God breaks through its boundaries. Does God have to be squeezed into what for the moment we understand about the universe? Or does our notion of what is possible in this world have to be accommodated to God's self-disclosure in the story of Abraham and Sarah, the fortunes of Israel, and above all the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

It's not a question about calculation: working out theoretically whether there are limits to what God can do. The question is put not to our hypothetical and speculative reason, but to our *faith*.

[D] Radical faith in a profoundly radical God

For many people *faith* is a simple matter of belief in God, as opposed to not believing. That can be with no great struggle involved; no great cost; nothing to sacrifice. But faith in the God of Abraham and Jesus is quite another matter, because this God takes us far beyond what seems natural and reasonable. This is a God who vastly exceeds our minds and who breaks out of our carefully stated theological propositions, a God who comes in poverty and who works redeemingly in the world through the folly of the cross. This is a God who is not bound by the parameters of good sense and whose possibilities are not exhausted by what *we* think is possible in this world.

It is possible for us, like Abraham and Sarah, to settle for barrenness, to settle for a powerless, inactive God. But then we are condemned to hopelessness. Then, like Abraham and Sarah, we will hear the promise of God as preposterous! Much better to be realistic!

But if we are disciples of the one who was crucified and raised by God to resurrection life, can we keep the future closed and live only with the *finite* possibilities inherent in the historical process? Can we shut out the possibilities for redemption and renewal which are not only the stuff of human yearning but the stuff of divine promise? Is the God of the Gospel not a God who does new things, indeed who gives life to the dead and who calls into being what could otherwise not exist (Rom 4:17)?

The question addressed to us in this story from Genesis is whether we shall take the bold step of affirming *divine possibility*; the bold step of believing that the kingdom of God *will come* in the fullness of time. Is the church's faith that the reign of God (which *has come* among us in Jesus Christ) *will come* in its fullness to be dismissed as mere pious fantasy? Consider whether Jesus Christ, the crucified risen one, is not still doing 'impossible' things to the most unlikely people! In the memorable words of the *Basis of Union*, is he not, 'in his own strange way', commanding attention, awakening faith, and calling people into the fellowship of those who take up the cross of discipleship in extraordinarily costly ways?

We are called to a radical faith, a faith that does not play safe with neatly calculable human possibilities but boldly affirms that God is not limited to human possibilities. God is not confined to what is conceivable and predictable, but makes new things, surprising things, happen, and entices us to be bearers and proclaimers of these new things. This God deconstructs the world of our imagination and reconfigures it to accord with his own good purpose. We live by faith in these divine possibilities, for if we were to put our trust in unfailing human wisdom alone and the surplus of human generosity over self-interest we should have to be supreme optimists.

[E] Is such faith possible?

Is such bold and radical faith possible? Probably not very often and not for very long. We are not very different from Abraham and Sarah in their resistance to the promise of God. So it is

important for us to remember that the basis of God's promises is not our *faith*. Our faith is far too fragile, far too vacillating. Even when we want to be faithful, we soon reach the limits of our faith. As workers in the harvest, we soon run out of energy or interest.

The basis of God's promises lies in the *freedom* and *grace* of God, not our faith. St Paul knew this when he spoke, as it were, in the same breath about faith and grace. We read this morning of our justification *by faith*. But through Christ we have been given access to the *grace* of God. It is on this that everything stands: our justification, our peace with God and our hope of sharing the glory of God in our final redemption.

The possibility of all this lies with **God**: God's unfathomable love and goodwill, God's faithfulness to the covenant made with humankind and sealed afresh on the cross, and God's power to overcome all our resistance and our opposition and to establish God's reign in and over all things. Our faith is not the basis of God's faithfulness or God's power to make good his promises. Rather, God's promises and God's faithfulness are the basis of our faith. This relation can never be reversed.

Yet God calls us to *faith*, as Abraham and Sarah were called to faith: faith in *divine* possibilities in this messy world of ours, in which every step forward of human *possibility* is accompanied by a step backward of human *impossibility*.

And in Jesus Christ God calls us into *discipleship*, to proclaim the good news of the kingdom, to relieve suffering and bring healing and liberation. The kingdom is *God's* business; it is a *divine* possibility, not reducible to *human* effort and *human* possibility. Yet God does not bypass us in its bringing it to fulfilment.

We live in a fractured world, but we also live under a *divine promise*: that the kingdom will come and that God's all-embracing purpose will be accomplished. Ultimately, our resistance to this promise and the poverty of our faith will not stand in the way.

To affirm with Holy Scripture that things impossible in the ordinary course of events are *not impossible for God* is to entrust ourselves and our world to this God, and to live – each day afresh – in faith and hope.

Thanks be to God.