

Genesis 12: 1-9

Psalm 33: 1-12

Romans 4: 13-25

Matthew 9: 9-13, 18-26

The iconic father Abraham

Some say the word Icon has come down in the world. Once a designation for a sacred image icons now appear on computer screens, or indicate the fashionable significance of a singer or sports person. Kylie Minogue and Garry Ablett, to name just two, are figures who have achieved “iconic” status. This means that, for some, their lives or their achievements have risen to be definitive. They have reached a touchstone of acceptability, ensuring them a place in one or other hall of fame.

The traditional icon of the Eastern Christian world has a different function. It was never meant to reproduce empirical data connected with the things we see around us. These pictorial essays show faces or scenes from the biblical world. They are windows into an alien frame of reference which impart a new light and meaning to our situation. If we offer them our studied gaze, what we find is that they engage with us in a way that is challenging, or even not negotiable. They give us directions to a new place and new perceptions. If we begin to read them, it is true to say, there is a way in which they begin to read us, because they shine with a light not their own.

Abraham is an iconic figure. Judaism saw him as the prototype of what was meant by true faith. He was the father of the faithful, and by that Judaism meant the chosen people, marked by the circumcision of the covenant. Primitive Christianity continued to revere Abraham for his faith, but Paul, particularly in Romans, brings forth a new light in the Icon of Father Abraham. He places a different stress on the notion of the father of the faithful. Paul’s base text is in Genesis 15 where Abraham is offered descendants more numerous than the stars, and is counted as righteous before the chosen people were formed. We should not underestimate the force of Paul’s insight. At a time when there was no hope Abraham would be the father of anyone. Before there was a covenant or a faithful people, Abraham was regarded as justified because of his unrestricted belief in God’s promise that he would be the father of nations. His faith preceded the Law, and the covenant and the holy people. His credibility came because of his hope against hope, his trust in the impossible possibility, deliverable only by God.

An Icon does point us to human achievement. It points us to another, in whose strength we live, just as Abraham did. Abraham brought no achievements of his own to this situation. He was as good as a dead man and Sarah was past the age, and the covenant did not yet exist. And In our Reformed tradition much has been made of this. Trust not in the human, make nothing of worldly achievements - everything depends on what God does. In Calvin this emphasis was turned into something that was potentially black: everything human is dross. There may be no room in faith for boasting of human achievements, and the Christian faith does call for self-abandonment, but it is a mistake to think this means we should despise ourselves. In Abraham God sought and found and loved what was human, in order to bless the world and all its people. In the call of Abraham God’s sights were set on a new human race and a new creation. The world

was embraced in order to bring blessing, and what God aims to bless we certainly should not despise.

The call of Abraham foreshadows the meaning of Christian existence before God. It shows us what it means to place our trust in God's ability to deliver life where no hope of life could be seen. Abraham stands first amongst all who trust God as he did. As seen by Paul with his emphasis on before, Iconic Father Abraham reveals that God's grace is available without preconditions. That means it is available to all. From now on we see that what constitutes the true Israel is not the historical population bearing th at name, but all those who, regardless of the nation, or the religious tradition to which they belong, follow Abraham's footsteps and choose the same basis for their lives.

Paul's reading of Iconic Abraham reveals the liberality of grace. The word liberal comes from the Latin "Liberalis" which means, "free man". Abraham was indeed a free man. His freedom was born of a liberality which is found first in God, who graced this unremarkable life with promises, and the status of being a righteous person, prior to any status Abraham achieved. The freedom to which Paul pointed here was blasphemous to some of his audience who could not stomach the idea that God could call the unrighteous - the uncircumcized who did not keep the law. But that is what God did in the case of Abraham, and Paul means to insist that the God the Christians believe in is indeed the God of the free man Abraham.

The picture of the God of liberal grace appears again, in vibrant colours, in the reading from Matthew where Jesus called a tax collector to discipleship, shared the hospitality of sinners, and brought death-defying, healing power to bear in the lives of those who were ostracised. Jesus was a living demonstration of the liberality of grace. In his life he showed what it meant to bring life as it is within the reign of God. He is for life, against death and suffering and ostracism. He transcended the law. Without preconditions he called Matthew the despised tax collector to follow him. He enacted the hospitality of God and fraternized with sinners. And soon, through the work of the Spirit, people from every nation under heaven were joined to his work. This is a living demonstration of the faith given to Abraham. Through similar trust in the goodness of God, blessing is extended to the people of the world. By this grace even we find ourselves to be loved, embraced and called to service. This is God's blessing bestowed on us and all people, that the world may be blessed, renewed and raised to new creation. Thanks be to God for the wondrous gifts of grace.