

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Psalm 27

Matthew 6:25-34

O Lord GOD, what will you give me?

[NOTE: Throughout, 'Abraham' is used for 'Abram' in the Genesis text].

It is surely a very strange text we have this morning from the book of Genesis.

It is also, of course, a *crucial* text – not only for the scriptural narrative but for what is happening in the world even today. (No small part of the events in the Holy Land over the last couple of years springs directly from what is said in our reading today from Genesis.)

I want to focus this morning just on the strangeness of the first promise about a great number of descendants, hoping to draw out not simply how unfamiliar to modern minds is the action in the story but how – that foreignness aside – there is a deeper strangeness which might speak to our sense of who and where we are, even now.

The text begins with the promise that God will be Abraham's shield, and that his reward will be very great. This sounds pretty good, we might suppose, and so it's perhaps a little surprising that Abraham responds with a question about the viability of his family tree. So far as he is concerned, that can be no shield or no reward while he remains childless. Or rather, the shield-and-reward Abraham looks for is precisely that he have descendants. The promise which God makes then is not a promise in relation to any passing personal crisis which needs to be fixed but the promise of a family which, for the most part, Abraham will not see.

God, then, restates the promise in terms of descendants numbered like the stars. This seems to satisfy the old man, and he 'believes'. The strangeness here is that I suspect there are few of us who would be satisfied that God had given us a significant gift if it were possible that we ourselves might not even see that gift realised. How could the promise of such an extension of Abraham's line into the future be the promise of a 'shield' and a 'great reward'?

And so we might wonder: if the promise of descendants *is* Abraham's shield here and now, what is the thing from which he must be shielded? If our protection is a future we will not see, what is it this future protects us against, here and now?

It might be enough for us right now not even to know the answer to this question as it relates to Abraham, but simply to see how different it is from our usual thoughts about what we think would constitute a shield or a reward for us here and now. Our personal and joint political lives are filled with desires for shields, and expectations of rewards, very few of which would be met with the promise of great-great-great grandchildren. That is, we don't want God's promises to come tomorrow, but today.

Yet this is exactly *not* what God promises Abraham.

And so we have to ask: if this *is* the divine order of things – if God's sense for what we need is located in tomorrow and not in today – how are *our* deepest desires for today wrong?

It's a bit scary, really – that we might be wrong about what we need. Though I don't want to dig too deeply into the promise of the land given in today's reading, it's worth noting that the guarantee of the land promise is given to Abraham in a deep sleep, within which descends a 'deep and terrifying darkness'. This is not just a cheery 'it's all going to work out OK in the end'. The thing God is going to do is like darkness to our sense of what is light – and this is shocking.

Again, we might wonder: if God's promise is the answer to the question Abraham imagines matters, what is the *question*? Because the answer doesn't make sense, given our normal questions. What is wrong with our questions given that God's answer to Abraham would not impress *us*?

I don't think I can answer the question about the right question(!) today in a way which will satisfy even myself, let alone you, unless – perhaps – it is simply this: that we are probably worried about the wrong things. Our questions don't accord with God's answers, with God's gift.

The exception to this is Abraham himself. When the text tells us that Abraham 'believed God', the point is not at all about credulity or even pious trust; Abraham believes because the promise is true both to himself and to God. Abraham and God are both bound and set free by the future-located promise.

To fill this out a bit, we should recall that, in addition to the importance of the promised descendants and the gift of the land for the biblical story, this Genesis text also features in St Paul's account of faith and justification by grace apart from moral works. That 'Abraham believed and God counted this as righteousness' became a central text for Paul's attempt to speak of God's freedom and the freedom of the children of God.

But Paul is not interested here in credulity – in the fact that Abraham simply believes whatever God says, as if the promise of countless descendants were not much different from the promise of an eternally re-filling packet of Tim Tams, and suggesting that if God had promised *that* Abraham would also have believed it.

Rather, God's promise of the descendants means this: even long after you have gone, Abraham, I'll still be there. But you will be present to me in my faithfulness to your descendants, in my remembering of my promise.

To be justified by grace in Paul's sense is just this: that, before God, we stand on nothing but that God remembers us. This is our end, and it is what Abraham believes.

But if we *believe* with Abraham that this is our end, then it is also where we begin. We start with the promise that we are the memory of God's promise to Abraham, and that there will be yet others by whom God remembers us.

All of this is to say that the whole thing – everything we think we are caught up in and worrying about and working towards – it's not really about *us* – not in the anxious way that we tend to experience it. "Abraham, your shield is not only that you will have more descendants than you could ever count, but more than you *will* ever count. But I will count them for you, and this will be your reward? It's not *just* about you."

And so for us, too: it's not just about us.

This, of course, seems like bad news: like a deep and terrifying darkness, as if the light of God's gaze is turned away from us to someplace, someone, else.

But it is in fact *good* news. It doesn't render us irrelevant but free. This is because the story – the great story of which we are part – is now not our problem to finish or resolve. Our role in the story is now less to strive than it is to play; less to calculate than to experiment; less to work than to pray – whether in words or actions.

