

Sermon by the Rev'd Dr Ian Terry, Rector of St Peter's Church, Bournemouth,

21st Feb 2016 2nd Sunday in Lent

Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18.

Who do you trust? – and how much?

Simple questions, but our responses to them shape our lives.

Whether it's on a down-to-earth level: someone wrote: "I have trust issues and, to start with, I'm pretty sure my bathroom scale is a liar!"

Or it may be more general gut-feeling about whether or not you can trust someone else: eg

A man walks into a Glasgow library and says to the librarian, "Excuse me Miss, do you have any books on suicide?"

To which she stops doing her tasks, looks at him over the top of her glasses, and says, "Get lost, ye'll no bring the book back!"

And, as with Abram, in our first reading, most people have questions about how much we can trust God. On the positive side, a Google scan on 'trust' gave me the telling one-liner: In God we trust – all others we virus-scan!

On the negative side, Woody Allen once quipped, "If there is a God, he is the ultimate *under-achiever*." Now, this is hard for those, like me (in last week's sermon), who have high

expectations of God. Surely, it is unthinkable that Almighty God could ever do anything less than the very best for the world? However, Woody Allen's cynical and deflating words are not too distant from the attitude of Abram at the beginning of Genesis 15 – as we heard earlier.

Abram has waited eagerly for the child God has promised him. But his patience has run very thin. He has experienced the days turning into weeks and weeks turning into months and months turning into years and, still, no son – and his wife is now elderly. So when a word from God is revealed in a vision which speaks in general terms about the promise of great rewards, Abram can't help but protest, "Who are you kidding? What do you mean - a reward? Your track-record isn't exactly wonderful – is it? So, now, in the face of all this soul-destroying waiting, you expect me to trust you?!" That's roughly what Abram is saying.

And Abram speaks for us all.

Don't let anyone ever tell you that following God is easy. It isn't. Sometimes, following God where He wants you to go feels as though it is downright foolish. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul explains how the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God, and the wisdom of God really does look foolish. And we can track this 'foolish' trusting behaviour through the Bible:

"You're going to build an ark, eh Noah? What good will that bit of escapism do?"

“You’re going to march around Jericho? That’s an interesting way to fight a war, Joshua!”

“You’re going to abandon your fishing practice, and wander around the countryside, are you Peter? How are you and your family going to eat?”

“You’re going to do nothing but heal people and preach the Word, Jesus? That’s not what people want. You won’t attract a crowd that way.”

But they were wrong, those prophets of doom, - weren’t they? – great crowds followed him, and still do.

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Nonetheless, it is often terrifying to follow God into what is unknown. Any of you at ‘crossroads’ moments in your lives – asking, ‘Where shall I go?’ - will know that. It was scary and courageous for Abram to leave Ur and go to Haran. And now God says, “Do not be afraid, Abram.” Why? Because God will be his reward? Maybe in his own mind, Abram tried to tone down this audacious promise by God. “God can’t mean that He will give Himself to me. He must mean He will just work on my behalf. He will work to protect me and provide for me. That must be what God means.” But that is not what God means. God means that *He Himself* is what Abram is seeking. God Himself is the missing piece of Abram’s life. God Himself, in this way, is Abram’s very great reward.

This is true for us as well. I’ll explain:

What do you pray for? If you categorize your prayer requests, you will probably find that you pray for six basic things. First, - for your physical needs, like food and finances. Secondly, - for wisdom to make good decisions. Thirdly, we pray to understand God more fully. Fourth, we often pray for help in times of suffering; and we pray for protection from those who are out to destroy us. Fifth, we pray for healing. And sixth, - for truth. Those, on the whole, are the things we pray for. Now, Abram also had specific needs. But God says to Him, and to us, “I know your needs, and I am going to give *myself* to you. In me, all your needs will be met.”

Julian of Norwich wrote this in the 15th Century:

God, of your goodness give me Yourself;

For You are sufficient for me.

I cannot properly ask anything less,

To be worthy of you.

If I were to ask less,

I should always be in want.

In you alone do I have all.

“Our hearts are restless until they rest in God.” We have to keep learning that throughout our lives – as God says, through the psalmist, “Be still, and know that I am God.”

Abram, however, is like us, he pushes for as much as he can get; so he says to God, “Okay God, you’re going to protect me from my enemies. That’s great. Okay, you’re going to give me Yourself. That’s wonderful. But *I want a son.*” And God’s answer is to commit himself to demonstrating that he means business by going through the rituals required in that society for making a binding oath. God tells Abram to prepare the animals – so he does. Then he waits. He twiddled his thumbs. He checked his watch. He stood up. He sat down. He paced around. He had done his part, but where was God? Had God stood Him up? Had God lied to Abram all along? These are probably the thoughts that ran through Abram’s mind as he waited and waited upon God. That is also our experience. We wait on God to bring lasting peace. Ownership of land is still one of the bloodiest matters that divides people and nations. Whether you look at boundary disputes between neighbours, planning permission conflicts that go on for years and consume people’s lives ... questions for us about how we make our church land and building inclusive for some without being off-putting to others ... questions for Israelis and Palestinians, questions for Syrian refugees ... so many *genuinely hard* questions, not readily dismissed, for us, as well as for Abram.

But then, in Abram’s story, we see that God doesn’t only keep us waiting, but, when his time is right, God also ***acts decisively***. Normally, both parties of the covenant would walk between the offerings on the sacred hearth, together,

showing that they *both* had responsibilities to maintain the agreement. But here God walks through alone, showing Abram that there is absolutely nothing Abram or his descendants have to do in order for God to keep this covenant of loving-kindness. And so it is with us.

Our need is for God alone. He will act decisively, in his own time, and intervene in our structures of injustice and our attitudes of disdain – the Bible tells us categorically that such is the nature of God. Whilst we sleep and scheme, the divine impatience erupts, and **God will act**. Our need is that we rest in God, our strength alone, our shield and our reward – not a reward for being so good, but just because God says to each of us, “Because you’re worth it!”, and Jesus shows on the cross that we are worth it.

All we have to do is trust Him, *accept* his love for us, and say, ‘Yes’.

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