

Service Transcript 25th July 2021

Welcome, Notices & Birthday Box

Leader What a God we worship!

Group A He has always known us; he is our Maker.

Group B He has always loved us; he is our Saviour.

Group A In our darkest hours he is our light;

Group B In our fiercest fight he is our shield.

Group A When we need direction, he is our guide;

Group B When our joy runs dry, he is our song.

Group A At the point of despair, he is our hope;

Group B at the moment of danger, he is our refuge.

Group A He is just and true, loving and merciful;

Group B He is Rock and Shepherd, King and Father.

All What a God we serve!

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1151 Above all powers

Father we thank you for being able to return to this place to worship You together after so many months. We thank you that even though we do not need a church building to worship You and to experience Your presence, You have given us each other that we may have fellowship together as we worship You, as we serve others and extend Your kingdom. You have called us to be Your body here in this neighbourhood and town.

Thank you for reminding us that we are who we are because You have loved us and through Jesus we have found forgiveness, hope and eternal life. Help us by Your Spirit to experience Your presence as we sing Your praises, as we pray and as we read Your word today. May Jesus be exalted! We as this in Jesus' name
Amen.

1184 Beautiful Lord, wonderful Saviour

Int. Prayer

RETURN TO CHURCH

Pray for the many churches in the Association that are restarting services this Sunday - Girton
Pray for those churches suffering financially because of loss of income during the pandemic, and also
Pastors who have lost their pastorates as a result.
Give thanks for the appointment of two new Regional Ministers, Gale Richards and Claire Blatchford.

MRBC

Open Prayer - Our practical needs & those requiring prayer.

Until I went back on a diet, I used to love the taste and smell of freshly baked bread and as some of you know, we have a bread maker. Which is just as well, as baking bread is not exactly a fast food activity as this video from the EBA illustrates

We often refer to waiting on God, which can be taken a couple of ways. We usually don't use it in the context of us waiting at table, although there is that clear call we have as God's people to serve Him.

What we often mean is waiting for God because He moves at a different speed to us. Very often the wait is worth it, as His plans are so much better than ours! In a few moments we are going to explore God's word. We have been studying Abraham and found that he as made significant promises by God, but he didn't understand how God may carry them out. We saw how he and Sarah second-guessed God and as a result Ishmael was born but he wasn't the child of promise, Isaac, the son of Sarah was to be. And Abraham's response: he laughed – how could God say such a thing – he was 99 and she was 90 – impossible! Impossible?

2032 Speak, O Lord

Reading Genesis 18

MONICO

In the mid 60s my Dad would often take me to the pictures to see films that interested him or me. We went our local cinema, the Monico in Rhiwbina in Cardiff, now a block of flats. This picture was taken in about 1972 and I'm pretty sure that's my Dad's car parked outside – the one I learned to drive on! In about 1967 he took me to see a Holywood epic of the time, John Huston's *The Bible: In the Beginning*. It was typical of Bible based blockbusters of the time – full of plenty of stars, big budgets, on location filming but incredibly wooden scripts, usually the most awful dialogue written to match the supposed style of the Authorised King James Bible which it drew heavily upon. Much of it is in places quite a fanciful interpretation of the Bible with plenty of stuff that was just not in the Bible.

The one scene I do remember from my childhood is this one:

THE THREE MEN VIDEO

This PICTURE is the scene we just saw with the three mysterious men appearing in the heat haze whilst Abraham was in his camp at Mamre. Unfortunately that isn't quite how Genesis 18 describes it. Rather than appearing out of the haze like Clint Eastwood in *High Plains Drifter*, the three men seemed to have just been there when Abraham looked up, like someone who catches you unawares.

It's only as we read through the chapter that we realise that two of these mysterious men were angels and the third was God Himself in human form. This is one of a number of so-called theophanies in the OT: God appearing in human form. We speculated as to whether Melchizedek was a theophany in chapter 14. What we do know is that up to the defeat of the kings in chapter 14, Abram's interaction with God had been along the lines "the Lord spoke to Abram," but after that, the Lord then appears to Abram in a vision in chapter 15 and as a person in chapter 17. The relationship was changing from a voice to an animate person, from remote communication to face to face. You know from today how different meeting face to face actually is!

In His grace, God had chosen to reveal Himself to Abraham in human form. That was rare in the OT but it goes to show how significant Abraham actually was in God's version of human history.

In chapter 18 God now appears again to Abraham and we see Abraham identifying God straight away. He had seen Him before. He knew who he was talking to. And he invites God and the two angels to stop with him and have a meal. It was more than just hospitality, Abraham knew who he was dealing with and he now wanted God there in his home.

Abraham got Sarah to bake bread. Do you know how long it takes to make bread? Yes we do as we just saw the video! And he gets a servant to slaughter and prepare the best of his flock which would take a while too. It looks like stalling to me.

HOW WELCOME IS JESUS?

What would you do if Jesus came into your home today? Would you want to stall Him? Would you be asking Him to stay longer? I bet you would! I would.

But this is the wonder of our faith. God *is* with us – *now!* His Spirit is here. And His Spirit is in each of us if we truly trust and follow Jesus. How much do we welcome His presence in the church and in our lives day by day? How much do we milk every opportunity to spend time in His presence? Only you and God know the answer to that.

And that's the challenge. Just how much do we take notice of Him. Which is where we get our title this morning. How up front and honest are we really with God in our own spiritual lives and as a church?

GOD ASKS AWKWARD QUESTIONS

The problem comes as you sit with God. You may be trying to wait on Him literally as Abraham did or waiting for Him to speak and lead. As Abraham sits with his guests, they then start to enter into awkward territory.

“Where’s Sarah?” Abraham was about to be called out for not being up-front with God or his wife. Abraham was a moral coward and he was just about to be found out because he hadn’t been up front with Sarah about having a child of her own. God had told him previously and he had chosen not to tell her presumably after the mess with Ishmael and Hagar. And Sarah was eavesdropping the conversation. Now there’s an old saying that eavesdroppers never hear good of themselves. But wouldn’t you eavesdrop if God came to your home and you were kept out of the conversation. Sarah had the shock of hearing God say she was going to be a mother. The reaction was the same as Abraham’s. What me? I’m 90 and Abe’s almost 100!! She laughed.

Here we are, back in the church and we realise that we have a challenge with the building – the ceiling needs repair and there’s a whole load of building work that has urgency to it. And then there’s the matter of getting everything running again after our long break. And what of the future of the fellowship? The words of God to Abraham and Sarah ring out to us.

Genesis 18:13-14 Then the LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, “Will I really have a child, now that I am old?” Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son.

IS ANYTHING TOO HARD FOR THE LORD?

Do we believe that? Is anything too hard for God? Do we think and act like He does or are we just a bit like Sarah who think all this hopeful talk is blue sky thinking after the last 18 months?

Why did Sarah laugh? What answer did she give to God? She lied and said she didn’t. He knew she did and she knew she did. Now is the time to be honest and be up front with God. We sing songs of hope and hear sermons like this one and Jesus says follow Me, trust me? As we say yes,

are we truly being up front with God? It's crunch time. Here we are back in the building, ready to roll again. What is our expectation of God? Is anything too hard for the Lord?

GOD IS UP FRONT WITH US

Let me conclude with the rather bizarre bargaining between God and Abraham as God reveals He is going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah and all in them. Next time I do a sermon on Abraham in two weeks time, I'm going to explore what the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah actually was. What was so bad about them that caused God to wipe them out – bearing in mind it takes quite a lot for God to do such a thing?

But what is clear that the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah was already sealed as God shares with Abraham what He's going to do. He's up front with him. VERSE *'The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.'* I wonder who was doing the crying out? The two angels were going to check it out. Who did they visit in Sodom? As they say in channel 4 soap, if you don't want to wait until next time, you can read chapter 19 of Genesis.

In one sense Abraham's response shows a compassionate side to him as well as one desiring justice – why should the righteous suffer the same judgement as the wicked? Good premise, but then Abraham starts a negotiation with God.

He then tells God how to do His job: *Far be it from you to do such a thing – to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?'* Should God destroy the whole lot if there were 50 righteous people there?

Yes He will do right, so God agrees. But was Abraham actually being honest here? Was all this stuff concealing his real agenda. His nephew Lot was there with his family. Surely they would be counted as amongst the righteous? If so, if God was to save the city, then Lot would be saved too.

TITLE

The trouble was that Abraham knew all about Sodom. He had saved many of them himself in his God inspired rescue of the people of Sodom captured by the Chedorlaomer and his allies. He also knew of their evil as he refused to take any spoils as a gift from the king of Sodom for his rescue. So he whittles God down as regards the number of righteous people that would be saved and ends his bargain with God at ten. If there were ten righteous people, God agreed to save Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham seems to have stopped at ten. Perhaps he thought that there were at least 10 and gave up at that point and he returned home.

Abraham was trying to do God's thinking for Him. His premise was wrong because he thought that surely God would save the cities if there were some righteous people there. Were the cities worth saving?

He never considered the option that God could extract the righteous people and destroy the cities anyway. The destruction of the cities probably improved the political stability and economy of Canaan considerably. Abraham did not see the bigger picture; God's picture.

NOT MY WILL BUT YOURS

In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed "not My will but Yours." How often is our prayer life like that? Or is it what Abraham's was; by making our requests conditional on what God does for

us. "Lord, if you bless me in this, I'll do that." Or perhaps "Lord, this is my agenda, it's good, honest and wholesome, its; thoroughly spiritual, so please bless it."

I know of so many Christians who have been so disappointed in prayer because God didn't do something for them that they thought was a good thing. But was it? Or could God see there was a bigger picture and they needed to see it too.

There have been other situations, where Christians did things that were wrong, and then expected Him to get them out of the mess without them recognising their guilt, their need to face consequences of their actions and their need to commit themselves to His way.

Or we try to endorse what is worldly or sinful by spiritualising it in some way and expect God to ignore the sin to bless the spiritual. Sodom and Gomorrah were desperately wicked cities, yet to save 10 righteous, were they really worth retaining? He was trying to tie God to an unrighteous action – saving the cities. Yet there weren't 10 righteous people, only 4 and God gave them the opportunity of salvation anyway. He knew what He was doing.

Don't bargain with God in prayer. Don't second-guess God in prayer. Lots of Christians do it. Pray the Jesus way, not my will but Yours. Post covid, do we as a church just go back to being what we were because much of what we did was good or perceived as good. Or do we say, what's Your way from here Lord? Where are You taking us? That way, Lord? Hadn't thought of that?

TITLE

All that nonsense because Abraham wasn't up front with God and asking for those four to be saved. The conversation would have been shorter. "Yes, I'll provide that way of salvation."

I know many people, Christians or otherwise who say "how can God truly judge and then condemn the world when there are so many really good people in it? Surely that's unjust. Yes it is, absolutely. But that's half the story. In His grace, in His mercy, God has already opened a way of salvation in Christ and offers it freely as a gift to all who would take it.

When God judges, He is never unjust. The way is open for all to follow if they only would. That is the Good News we bring. Let's never lose sight of it.

CONFESSION

Father

Help us always to be open and honest before You in our prayers and attitudes because you know everything and nothing is hidden from You. Save us from our own self-deception we pray, that we may discern your will, knowing that for You, all things are possible. Save us too we pray for making assumptions about You that are based on false assumptions and not Your word. May our lives and this church not be characterised by our will, but Yours.

Thank you that in Jesus, you have opened a way for all men and women to find forgiveness and salvation. May we speak out Good News whilst we still can to those we know and to this community. May Jesus have the glory.

We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen.

Ours is a message of hope and salvation not by our efforts, but by God's grace. Let's sing about it now.

441 *Only by grace can we enter*

Sung Benediction - *May the Lord shine on you (Andy Rayner)*

For reflection and discussion

Read Genesis 18

1. What experience do you have of God speaking to you, or speaking to Church. In what ways did that happen and how did you discern it was God speaking?
2. What would you do if Jesus came into your home today? Look at Romans 8:9-11. How does that change things for you? Knowing what happened when Abraham invited God into his tent, what should we expect from such an encounter?
3. How do we reconcile God's righteous judgement with knowing that He is a God of love and justice?