

Heirs of the Father...

Richard Dawson – 20/03/2011

Gen 12¹⁻⁴/ Psalm 121/ Romans 4¹⁻¹⁷/

As we begin to look towards Easter the greatest festival on the Christian calendar we need to trace again the human history of that event as it begins with Abraham. Galatians tells us that the events of Easter, the death of Christ on the Cross and His resurrection are in fact about the passing on of a blessing. Listen to this...

¹³Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—~~for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”~~¹⁴—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (Gal 3)

So it is, in fact, the blessing of Abraham that Christ has made available to all who would believe. And what is the blessing of Abraham? It is faith to believe in God – faith that will bring us close to God – faith that will release the promises of God in our lives and faith that will, finally, grant us eternal life.

Abraham is a biblical hero – a man whom God not only blessed but who impressed God by his obedience so much so that he is still referred to in the New Testament as a model for our faith. So we're going to take a closer look at this man this morning and see what we can glean from the record of his life.

Abraham is recorded in both the OT and the NT as the beginning of the human history of God's grace to the world. As Genesis records God said to him,

³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

From the very beginning God's purpose was to bless all of humanity and through humanity to bless all Creation. Abraham is the vessel of this blessing but he is not the origin. Rather the origin, the source of the blessing is none other than Christ Himself.

³For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness..." ²³Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, ²⁴but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the

dead, ²⁵ who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

So in fact Jesus is the focus of what was begun in Abraham. Abraham is the start of the human journey back to God and to redemption. Adam and Eve began that journey with God but parted company through their disobedience. The biblical record shows humankind continuing to prosper but with every advance sin rears its ugly head and we find pride, violence and the destruction of our own habitat accompanying that rise. So much so that by the time of Noah God has had enough and he determines to begin again with Noah and his family. The flood occurs and only Noah is prepared for it. He survives and begins again but almost immediately the same old problem with sin arises. However, from his seed, from his offspring arise the Semites, a clan from which Abraham will arise. 10 generations after Noah Abram is born to Terah, a direct descendant of Noah.

Abram is called to leave Haran and to travel through the wilderness to Canaan and it is that call which we have heard today. Let us note several things about that call. Abram has not displayed anything in particular that might set him apart as a reason why God should choose him. There may be reasons but we are not told them. Abram is, as far as we can tell, simply one of us – a human, just like us. And even if there are reasons, even if Abram is a faithful kind of guy, someone who believes, someone who wants to please God; even if he is like this, the story of his life will go on to reveal that he is also flawed and that he makes mistakes – some pretty big mistakes. There is really no getting away from the fact that we are all sinful.

Furthermore, there is certainly nothing to suggest why he, of all people, should be made into a great nation. And if we examine the point in time where God promises these things to him it seems clear that Abram has done nothing whatsoever to **deserve** this sort of favour. In other words, the promise of God to Abram is all **grace!** Abram has not **earned** this favour.

Finally, let us also note that the promise to Abram is not just to himself but in fact is a promise to some others. For a starter how is God going to make a nation out of him? Through, of course, his wife, Sarai, who is, at this point in time old and barren. The promise will, however, also cover Abram's servants and other relations including one nephew Lot who really doesn't deserve God's favour at all. But there is more! The promise to Abram actually includes people from 'all the families of the earth!' Think of that! God's working with this man is not just for himself, or for his family, or for his own people or even for those on his continent... but for people from every family on earth. Abram is, in fact, blessed for one main purpose – and we do often forget this because we focus either on the man himself or, indeed, on the people who arose from his descendants – the Jews – and this was that he might **be a blessing to all of humanity. Abram was blessed to be a blessing.**

So if Abraham is our model in faith and he is blessed to be a blessing then we too are no different. One of the central messages, therefore, of Easter is that we are given a gift freely **that we might give freely.** As Paul says, we are they who do not come to God on the basis of our

works but in faith that we are justified through the work of Christ. And if we cannot come to God on the basis of anything we've done we cannot point the finger at others for what they have not done. Arguments on the basis of works are null and void in the Christian faith. We have received freely – **for one purpose only, not that we might boast but... so that we might give freely.**

Let me make two further points about Abram's part in all of this because I think they help us establish a basis for our thinking about Easter which is so important.

Firstly let us dwell for a moment on the humanity of Abram, or, as he became, Abraham. As I've already said, this man is given a promise without having first done anything that we can see for God. And yes, he did go on to do some remarkable things for God not least of which is obeying God in regard to the sacrifice of his son. But he is also known for some mighty blunders. He palmed his wife off twice as his sister and almost had her married to other men – rulers no less. This is done out of fear that they might see her beauty and decide, once knowing that she was his wife, to do away with him so that they could have her. Abraham's solution? To give her away first! Great to be a wife in those days eh?! Abraham's decision to keep the peace by sleeping with his wife's servant Hagar created not only huge trouble for Sarai and for Abraham but created a further huge problem for many others down the line not least the people who would spring from a legitimate heir. Abraham is nothing if not human. He is a man faithful in many things but unfaithful in some. He is, at times, fearful and indecisive and at other times quite the leader. SO he is flawed, he is human and yet God chooses to begin the human journey towards Christ through him. God, it seems, is not afraid of the flaws, the mistakes, the humanity of Abraham. He will bless him anyway so that all humanity might be blessed through him.

Christ is the focus of our faith but God has chosen to use ordinary human beings to be a part of the heritage of Christ – indeed, to be a part of who Christ is. He was not afraid of our flesh or, indeed, repelled by it. And we must remember this when God calls us to any kind of action or service. The issue with us is never about how competent or good we are. It is always about the fact that God has called us and if we are going to participate in God's mission to the world we need, frankly, **to get over ourselves.** I do believe that this is so often where we're tripped up in obeying God. We look first at the vessel (ourselves) and we say, 'inadequate!' – cannot complete the task, will probably stuff it up – don't go there. The Bible has a technical name for 'getting over ourselves' and it is called – dying with Christ. The very heart of Easter provides for us this dynamic which is so important in the life of every Christian. Let us remember then – If God could 'get over' the humanity of Abraham surely we can get over ourselves. And we will do if we keep our eyes on Christ.

The second thing we need to remember about this human beginning to Easter – the man Abraham who was so blessed by God is this... **he lived with struggle for almost his whole life in pursuit of what God had called him to.** Yes he became a significantly wealthy man by his own day's standards and yes he did eventually command almost an army of servants and helpers but for his whole marriage up until the time he was 100 years old Abraham lived with childlessness

and with this nagging grief over having children. And this clearly had significant effects on his relationship with Sarah to the point where she insisted that he sleep with Hagar and conceive through her. Furthermore in leaving Haran he left behind all he had known and a secure life and an extended family and he travelled into unknown places; places of extreme heat and little pasture, places where he was vulnerable to attack. He existed as a foreigner for most of his pilgrimage which lasted until his death. He was, at the very least, never at home where he lived and, on many occasions he was resented and suspected by the locals. Yes some welcomed him but the very fact that he could mount an army to defeat the Kings who kidnapped Lot says an awful lot about the circumstances of his life. What am I saying here?

I am simply saying that we whom God has chosen to be a blessing to others will need to expect hard times and difficulties. We will not be immune to earthquakes, sickness and loss. We will struggle at times either with ourselves or with the world or, indeed, with the enemy of our souls – Satan. The NT doesn't use war as a metaphor for Christian life without reason. We are in a battle and we will all need to learn how to fight. As Paul says in Ephesians...

¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹²For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. (Eph 6)

Abraham does stand firm but not without the help of God – not without God's intervention and grace. Easter is a time when we remember together what really counts in our life with God and it's not superhuman strength; it's not native ability or talent and it's not a natural kind of religiosity. What counted with Abraham was God's grace and what will count for us will also be God's grace. The work of faith is to believe that God can where we think we can't. It is to believe in God and God's love for us. Can I invite you to pray for this – to pray that we might all stand firm with God