

A few of you might have listened to this on Sunday and thought - that was a bit easy! Maybe, but remember the text of a sermon is only a starting point. And there will have been people there who have never ever heard the stories about Abraham before.

So for those of you with a bit of time, can I suggest you take the major stories of Abraham (Genesis 12 - 25) not from Abraham's standpoint, but from Sarah's - or perhaps from Isaac's. Go back over the stories and think yourself into their shoes. What does that do to the message and to the significance of this great saga? Does it make it more or less important for Christians?

Have fun and if you have something to share, let us know!

As ever,
John

SERMON FOR LENT 2 4 March 2007

After the 'Ashing' of last Sunday and our reflection on those things which keep us from following God for long, I thought that today we would look at one of the Bible's greatest sagas.

By Saga I don't of course, mean the holiday company for the retired! Instead I want to think of stories – old stories, stories that we sometimes half remember from our Sunday School days but which, because they are in the Old Testament, tend to get a bit jumbled up in our memories.

Stories are so important in our lives: that is why I take photographs. Catriona happened to come across a few pictures of me when I was at school and in a few brief moments a whole world was unlocked. The same is true if we look carefully at our Biblical heritage. Also this week I had the privilege of starting a new 'Basic Christianity' course with a young mum in the parish. She says she 'knows nuttin' - which isn't quite true of course, but as we began to tell the story of Abraham which lies at the heart of our first reading today, she got more and more excited.

And that was after we had had to go through her partner telling her that these stories, these sagas from the mists of time in the OT, aren't "true" in the modern sense. She was quite shocked by this: surely all the Bible is true! As so often, we had to say – yes and no. These sagas aren't historically accurate but they do tell us 'The Truth' which, of

course, is far more important. If Abraham lived at all it was probably around 1200 BC – but there are quite a few scholars who think he was made up by the teachers of the Exile in around 550BC, and if that is accurate then we lose nothing: this story isn't about one individual traveller; it is, actually, about all of us. That is what sagas do: they take the particular and they make them true for all of us. So don't let's get hung up on the modern idea of accuracy. Abraham may have been a real person, or he may have been a mix of people; he may have been more of a mythological figure. The fact is that for 2,500 years he has become a central plank in our understanding of the way God and his people relate to each other and that will do for now!

So we've opened our Bibles on page 1 and got ourselves through the Creation stories, into Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel and eventually to the Tower of Babel. Now the scene is set for something else and we get one of the those fantastic genealogical lists: - the last bit of which goes *When Serug had lived 30 years he became the father of Nahor, Nahor became the father of Terah and Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran...* The scene is set for one of the biggest events ever.

But where? Deep down at the very bottom bit of Saudi Arabia, in a place called Ur. (If your geography isn't too hot, then it's the bit of land that stretches down south of Israel, between Africa and India, north of the equator!) And it is in Ur that God tells Abram (his name gets changed later of course) to think big: *Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land which I will show you.. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you.* But the plain fact here was that Abram was 75 years old and we have already heard that his wife Sarai is barren and can't have children. By any stretch of the imagination this is bonkers. Old, childless, surely it was time to see his last years out with the own people?

Lesson number one from the saga writers: if you are going to be involved with God and want to be faithful in any real sense, there are going to be some pretty tough demands and absolutely no guarantee of a safe and comfortable old age.

So Abram journeys up north and has to cross Egypt. Dodgy territory this with the stealing of good looking wives like Sarai a speciality. So Abram tells Sarai to pretend to be his sister and she promptly gets 'married off' to the Pharaoh. But then God sends horrible diseases to Pharaoh and the truth comes out: loaded up with loads more animals and goods than he came with, Abram and Sarai carry on the journey north. Lesson number two: when you get stuck, ask God for help. It works like a charm every time!

But the problem of being childless gets to Abram and so we hear today Abram moaning that Eliezer of Damascus will inherit everything after he dies. But in a dream Abram is told that his descendants will inherit a vast empire – from the Nile to the Euphrates – or the old borders of Israel to you and me.

But how will that happen? Like all good stories, it isn't straight forward. Sarai, being the good wife she is, thinks that the answer is for Abram to sleep with her slave, Hagar; and in no time at all, Hagar gets pregnant. But that hardly accounts for human nature. As soon as Ishmael is on the way, Sarai gets incredibly jealous and throws the slave girl out. But this is only the beginning; there's lots more like that to come.

Next, Abraham – at ninety nine – is summoned to meet with God again and – arthritis and all – he has to fall to the ground as was the custom. And the message is not only that he will have his name changed to Abraham (and Sarai's to Sarah) but, as a sign of the new covenant which God is making with him – that he will be father of the nations - he has to undergo circumcision too. Never was there a more eye-watering example of 'no pain, no gain'! This would be the permanent mark of God's favour for Abraham and all his children. Lesson number three: God has plans for everyone and it pays to listen to what he says because it is going to happen anyway. But it might hurt!

Back to the saga: with Hagar and Ishmael out of favour, how was the legitimate side of things going to be sorted? With another odd story of course, this time the visit of the three mysterious visitors (sometime thought of as angels). With Sarah listening to every word, they tell Abraham (this being men's business of course) that his wife, at whatever great age she was by this time, was going to get pregnant herself. Sarah laughs like a drain and the men overhear. But no matter, what the angels say happens and eventually – to everyone's joy (except Hagar and Ishmael presumably Abraham and Sarah become the proud parents of Isaac – who of course is half brother to Ishmael - now sent with his mother into the desert to become the origins of the Arab nations. It's all there in the Good Book if you look hard enough.

We are now within striking distance of the end of the Abraham saga but not before one extra twist is included. For just at the moment when Abraham is thinking of Isaac being the source of his world-wide family with his future wife Rebekah, God tests him one more time. Lesson number four, don't take anything for granted.

We all know the story of the journey of old man Abraham and his strapping young son Isaac, ostensibly on their way to offer a sacrifice on the mountainside, which turns out to be Isaac himself. It is past our comprehension that any of us could ever think of killing our child in such circumstances. But, as Maria tells me when the gory bits come on screen, *it is only a story!*

True: but it is this story that marks Abraham out from the rest. Such is his trust in God that EVEN this could be asked of him and he would obey. He has already left his homeland and tried to balance the emotions of two female partners. He had even got himself circumcised. Now was the ultimate test: *are you really the man I thought you were?* asks God.

And because the answer is yes, Abraham remains the key symbolic figure for everyone – male or female of course – who trusts that what is being asked of them is worth the effort.

So what made Joanne so excited on Friday morning? Fresh to all of this she came to the obvious conclusion: *why do we sit around and moan about all the things we haven't got and how unfair life is when these people – with so much less – were willing to give up the one thing they valued?*

Got it in one. Which is why St Paul talks so excitedly about Abraham in Romans and in Galatians as being our 'father in faith'. And that is why this great saga was worked over so much by the Early Church Fathers like Clement, Augustine of Hippo and Ambrose.

Except that they went one stage further. They took young Isaac and his place in the sacrifice as being a fore-runner of Jesus. And why not? Why shouldn't we read our Bibles in this way, with links all over the place? That is how why we call the Scriptures the inspired Word of God.

But let's do this next theme another day. For now let's take Abraham and this great story to heart: here is someone who trusted God though there was absolutely no evidence to reassure him. It was sheer faith that carried him through, and it is that same faith that will sustain us, if only we can let God's voice overcome our own wavering doubt!