

Advent Sunday 28th November 2010
Matriarchs and Patriarchs: Abraham and Sarah

During Advent we are following the themes for Sundays in Advent followed by our Advent study text, Paula Gooder's *The meaning is in the waiting*. So today I will look at Abraham and Sarah, next week John Dunnill will look at the prophets, and the last two Sundays I will look at John the Baptist and Mary.

The readings set for the day don't always match well.

Abraham and Sarah are deeply important figures - St Paul holds them up as examples to all Christians that faith is what matters in terms of salvation. The writer to the Hebrews does the same as he goes through the heroes and heroines of the Hebrew Scriptures; each paragraph starts with the two words 'by faith' and is followed by a name, Abraham, Moses... Abraham and by association Sarah were obedient to God. It is worth getting out your bible at home and reading the story of Abraham and Sarah in one go - Genesis chapters 12-25.

The story starts with God instructing Abraham to leave home and everyone behind and to go to a place that God will show them. And God attaches three promises of land, descendants (very important to a couple in later life that have no children) and that they will be a blessing. They go on a journey which lasts them the rest of their lives. It is a journey governed by these two things - obedience to God's command to go and hopeful expectations the promises will be

fulfilled. In fact they are banking on that. They arrive in the Canaan where Abraham sets up an altar and gives thanks but then they move on. As they move on to Egypt because there is famine in the land the promises are put in jeopardy. When they arrive in Egypt Pharaoh sees Sarah who is beautiful and takes her for his own wife - Abraham, in fear of his life, has told Sarah to say that she is his sister, and she may have been his half-sister. God intervenes and Pharaoh gives her back hastily with compensation and a deportation order. As nomadic herders they prosper, but still have no land of their own. Lot, Abraham's nephew who had come with them, has to separate from them because the land can't sustain grazing such large herds. Lot heads for the region around the Jordan and the east bank of the Dead Sea, at that time a fertile occupied area.

Some Elamite kings from Mesopotamia attack the kingdoms round the Jordan and Dead Sea and carry off lots of loot and Lot and his family. Abraham intervenes and drives off the Elamites, recovers all the booty and all the captives and returns everything to the former owners - having no land but large herds he is terrified of putting local landed people off side. At this point, perhaps 14 years after the original instruction to move, God tells him three things: Don't be afraid, I am God your shield, and all I promised will come your way. Abraham is possibly justifiably anxious. By this time he is 84 if you follow the chronology of the story, Sarah is 75, no land has come their way and more

importantly no heir to the Abraham and Sarah millions. Time is running out isn't it? Abraham sounds almost petulant as he complains to God that if God doesn't get a move on it will be a slave who will inherit. God tries to reassure him by a ritual common in those days called 'cutting a covenant' - a deeply solemn and binding agreement involving halving animals, walking between them implying 'may those entering the agreement end up like these animals if they don't keep their word.' It is a stunning thing for God to do. It doesn't seem to have much effect in allaying the anxieties of either Abraham or Sarah. I find this notion that people can have huge reassuring religious experience and still remain anxiously deeply reassuring.

Their anxieties get the better of them and of their faith in God as one who will indeed provide. Sarah suggests that they do the surrogacy thing - as common in those days as it is today. Here they are taking matters into their own hands - it is almost like they have heard the saying 'God helps those who help themselves' - which is NOT in the Bible. It has disastrous consequences - a baby, Ishmael, is born to Hagar, Sarah's slave whom she has given to Abraham as a concubine. Abraham has concurred. Hagar then despises Sarah. Sarah gets deeply upset, and plays the blame game ('It's all your fault' she tells her husband). He says 'Do what you like.' She treats Hagar harshly. Hagar takes off with the child find themselves in trouble and are rescued by God and brought back into a deeply uncomfortable relationship in the household. It is a helpful story as we look to

God's promises in our own waiting times - be careful of trying to force God's hand or providing the answer yourself.

God appears again to Abraham and Sarah with renewed promises and now new names. Up to this point in the story their names have been Abram and Sarai, meaning exalted father and princess respectively. The name changes mean little in terms of sounds but much in terms of meaning. We are told Abraham means father of a multitude. Sarah is princess still but the change in sound gives greater significance. Sarai sounds rather like a Hebrew word for distress. Sarah breaks that link with distress so that she is really now just princess - much more positive.

Three visitors then arrive and Abraham offers hospitality - the fattened calf is killed, new bread is made and the visitors are fed. As they get up to go on their journey it becomes apparent that they are God's messengers and they tell Abraham that this time the next year Sarah will have a child. Sarah hears this and can't stop a laugh exploding from her. Paula Gooder suggests that this laugh reveals a real mix of emotions from deep cynicism (Abraham is now 99, she is 90), to a deep wistfulness. However within the year the baby is born and his name Isaac appropriately means laughter.

But it doesn't end there because while Isaac is a lad, perhaps about 8-10 years old, God commands Abraham to sacrifice him. They go off to a mountain where Abraham binds his son places him on wood on an altar and takes a knife to kill

him. God intervenes and provides a ram caught in a thicket as the sacrifice. It is a story about faithful obedience to God's command - it is also about jeopardy to the promise and if you look at the story from Isaac's point of view it is a very dark story which invites us to wrestle with it. While God is proved to be one who provides, Abraham is severely tested. At the end of the story very little of the promise can be seen to have been fulfilled - one descendant, the only land possessed is a field that Abraham buys because it has a cave in it and he wants the cave as a family mausoleum. We know from the rest of the scriptures how much the promises are eventually fulfilled - Israel with God's help conquers the promised land at the end of the Exodus and by then the number of descendants is reputedly in the millions.

One of the great benefits of looking at the story of people like Abraham and Sarah where important stories are told about various episodes in a stage of their lives is that we are able to see the big picture; how these episodes have enormous impact on them and on human history; and where God may be at work. Our life stories can echo their stories in quite remarkable ways - how we can experience a call from God to leave things and people behind and embark on a journey that we don't know the end of (St Hilda becoming a nun is like this); how we have changed our names at significant times of our lives; how sometimes children's aspirations are sacrificed to their parents' own unfulfilled desires; how we too can feel very anxious in a situation where we do not yet belong; how

our unfulfilled desires can lead us into rash action which has disastrous consequences for human relationships; and how God can be present in all of those episodes.

As an exercise for home try drawing your life as a journey. Where did it start? Where are you now? What has happened in between that has strongly influenced you and has led you to the place you are now at? How does a story like that of Abraham and Sarah's resonate with your journey? What other stories come to mind which resonate more strongly? Where has God been visible?