

Arnhem, August 11th 2019, Year C, Eighth Sunday after Trinity.

Readings: Isa 1:1,10-20; Ps 50:1-8,23; Heb 11:1-3, 8-16; Lk 12:32-40

Jewish literature has many legends about Abraham. One of these goes as follows: When Abraham was still a boy, he watched the sun rise above the desert. 'Surely, the sun is god, the Creator!' the boy said and he knelt down and worshipped the sun. But when the sun sank the boy said: No, the author of creation cannot set!' Then the moon and the stars came out and Abraham said: 'The moon must be god and the stars his host!' So he knelt down and worshipped the moon. But of course, morning came, the moon disappeared and the sun rose again and Abraham said: Truly, these heavenly bodies are no gods, for they obey law; I will worship him who imposed law upon them.'

The Arabs also have their legends. One of them tells that Abraham's father Terah worshipped idols and also was a manufacturer of idols. One day Abraham was left in charge of the shop. A woman came in with a dish of meat for the gods. Abraham took a stick and smashed all the idols but one, in whose hands he set the stick he had used. When Terah returned he was angry, but Abraham said: My father, a woman brought this dish of meat for your gods; they all wanted to have it, and the strongest knocked the heads of the rest, lest they should eat it all.' Then Terah said: 'That is impossible, for they are made of wood and stone.' And Abraham replied: 'Let thine own ear hear what thine own mouth has spoken!'

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews must have been familiar with many of these stories. They tell us how Abraham searched for God. The idolatry of his people irritated him, up to the point where he thought: 'I must be out of here!' and recognized this as the voice of God: leave your family, leave your country. I have something better for you. After all that he had learned so far he was ready

for the adventure, and so he was being called out into the unknown to find God.

Faith is being ready for an adventure. Faith is being able to face the unknown. Faith is the awareness that something better is waiting for us. Faith is the recklessness to leave the familiar, because we have come to identify it as harmful and unreliable. Faith is the willingness to stake everything on God. We may only have a dim idea of this great Mystery that is beckoning at the back of our minds and in our hearts. We only know that it is worth searching for.

This may mean a literal, personal leaving, but we are also called as a community. So, fast forward many centuries to the time of the Psalms and the prophets. The Israelites had their own history of setting out for the unknown. First when the whole patriarchal family of Jacob moved to Egypt to live there. Then a few generations later when the whole people broke up again to travel to the promised land – leaving their houses to live in tents. But now, after all these centuries in the promised land, they have settled. They have put their roots down. They live in houses, in cities; their political and religious life has been sorted; they have their kings, their priests, their prophets, their temple and their sanctuaries, with rules and regulations firmly in place. Arrived at last! Hurray for the good life!

But it was only for the happy and powerful few, this good life. Their religious and political life may have been sorted, their social life was a disgrace. There was no justice in the land. The widow was not being cared for, nobody was looking after the orphans. Their noisy religious life kept them occupied from sunrise to sunset, but their hearts remained unchanged. Now we all know that in the hands of unchanged people religion can be very dangerous. A tool of

oppression, a tool of exploitation, a tool of manipulation. And this is precisely what was happening.

This hadn't been God's purpose when he called Abraham out of Haran. This hadn't been God's purpose when he called Israel out of Egypt. God has something better in store than this – not just for his people, but for his whole creation. As soon as we become complacent and self-satisfied and inward-looking, - as soon as we forget God's purpose, we can be sure that God will be there to irritate us.

So here comes the prophet Isaiah, talking openly about the stinking swamp of injustice beneath the flowery surface. Here is the poet of Psalm 50, spitting out God's disgust with a religion that has everything under control, including God himself, without realizing that it has become perverted. We did not read the whole Psalm, so I will read a bit more of it now: 'What right have you to recite my statutes, or take my covenant on your lips? You make friends with a thief when you see one. Your tongue frames deceit. You thought that I was one just like yourself.'

You thought that I was one just like yourself. There is no Mystery in that. Nothing that fills people with awe and longing. Nothing that calls them out to something better. Nothing that challenges them to see things differently or to do things differently. So now God challenges them to a different way of living. To the possibility of a future beyond their imagination. If only they give up their self-centered comfortable lives, and stake everything on that future. 'Cease to do evil', says Isaiah. 'Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.' In the words of Psalm 50: 'Go the right way and you will see the salvation of God.'

What would it mean for us, to set out for the unknown? Don't we know all there is to know already? Abraham did not have a Bible, or a liturgy or any doctrine. Over the centuries the people of Israel had gained more understanding, but they, too, did not have the whole picture. We know how God has revealed himself fully in Jesus, don't we? We know how to follow him, and we have the kingdom of God to look forward to, don't we?

Now there is something problematic about this translation of the Greek word *basileia*. It makes the kingdom of God sound too much like a place. It would be much better if we read 'kingship'. So setting our hearts on the kingdom does not mean that we just have to stick it out down here, looking forward to eternal bliss in heaven. For heaven's sake, let us not make that mistake. We have been given this kingship here and now. We are kings, called out of our comfort zone, called to action for this world. Setting our hearts on the kingdom means that we take our kingship seriously. That climate change and modern slavery and all the other horrible mess in the world really get to us. That we are prepared to respond to God's challenging vision of a different future. Now this is daunting! This is going to cost us! But if we treasure this vision, we will set our hearts upon it. If we treasure this God, then we will leave what we know and respond to God's call. We may only have a dim idea of this great Mystery that is beckoning at the back of our minds and in our hearts. We only know that it is worth searching for and working for.

So be ready for action. Be prepared to stake everything on God. To leave behind whatever is holding you back.

Be ready for adventure, and you will be called children of Abraham.

Glory to God, Source of all being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit.

As it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever, Amen.