

Genesis ch. 18 v. 20-32 – Abraham ‘negotiating’ with God

The writers of the stories in the collection we call the book Genesis depicted God in a very human way. In the Creation story, for example, God ‘walks in the garden in the cool of the evening’, an activity we have all had reasons to treasure recently. When he can’t find Adam in the garden he doesn’t beam into his extra-terrestrial powers of satellite navigation, he simply calls out “Adam, where are you?”. And here in the extraordinary story we had read to us earlier, he conducts a kind of courtroom negotiation over the merits and demerits of accepting the risk of collateral damage when trying to bring an end to a dreadful regime. We ourselves will soon be commemorating the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of a war in which our own people decided that, yes, it was justifiable, in order to bring an end to an evil regime, along with the military and supportive civilian administration of that regime to kill thousands of civilians, many of whom themselves abhorred Nazism, in what became known as ‘carpet bombing’. Cologne, Hamburg, Dresden, Berlin became the Sodom and Gomorrah of our time.

To appreciate this story and enjoy it - yes, enjoy it - we need to know something of the background. Abraham and his nephew, Lot, had set out with their entire families, workers, servants, and livestock together with all their possessions on a nomadic search for a ‘promised land’. As they travelled and set up tent in place after place, they both became very prosperous, to the point that wherever they settled down for a while there just wasn’t enough room for all their people and animals. Quarrels started breaking out between their respective shepherds and herders.

It was Abraham who broke the impasse by suggesting to Lot that they part company and that Lot should choose which way he would take his future wanderings. Whichever way Lot chose, he, Abraham would go the other way with no offence taken. Lot noticed that what we might call the Jordan route looked much more inviting than the Canaan route, and that, understandably, was the way he chose. The writer tells us, ominously, that two of the towns in the direction Lot chose to take his people were Sodom and Gomorrah. The writer goes on to say “Now the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners before the Lord”.

What is even more ominous is that the story teller has already made it clear to us that the God he depicts is one who is likely to run out of patience with persistent evil and wickedness and will ultimately destroy entire collections of such people, with few exceptions, for example by drowning them all in a gigantic flood.

Just exactly what kind of sin the people of Sodom indulged in has, of course, been grossly misunderstood. The very name Sodom has a certain connotation about it, Sodomites becoming a word to describe people whose sexual attraction end orientation is towards people of the same gender as themselves, especially men 'of that kind'!

People who believe that do need to read the Genesis stories more carefully. Admittedly, a number of the men of Sodom are depicted in Genesis ch.19 as surrounding Lot's house where the two visitors are staying and demanding to have them brought out so that they can have sex with them. But these people are just as happy when Lot says " No, you can't do that, these men are my guests. That would be a terrible breach of hospitality. Here, have my two young virgin daughters instead!" No, these Sodomites are just violent thugs. The writer of the book of Ezekiel actually lists the sins of Sodom as 'arrogance, haughtiness, having too much food and prosperous ease and not helping the poor and hungry'. Jesus himself referred to Sodom and Gomorrah as examples of people whose hospitality towards strangers was dreadful. Whoops! Arrogance, haughtiness, too much prosperity, inadequate care for people in need, rejection of strangers. Haven't I come across that somewhere else? Surely we can't be today's Sodom and Gomorrah? Mind you, that was a cracking storm the other day.

Anyway, back to the story.

Lot and his tribe have settled down in or near Sodom. Abraham has pitched tent near the Oaks of Mamre. He is visited by three men. As the story develops these turn out to be two 'angels', or messengers, and God. Abraham is told that he will be the father of many nations, which his wife, Sarah, thinks is a bit of a joke since they are both in their nineties now and haven't got any children – but that's another story.

The two 'angels' then leave, on their way to check whether the people of Sodom really are as bad as they have been made out to be. If they are, destruction is their next mission. God, as the third visitor appears to be, confides in Abraham about the impending fate of the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham, partly out of concern for his nephew, Lot, and his family, and partly out of a sense of outrage that God could be, apparently, so indiscriminate in his action, begins this wonderful piece of very Jewish bargaining.

"What if there are, say, fifty people in the town who are not like the others. Surely you'd spare the town for their sake?"

"Yes, if there are fifty 'righteous ones', ok, all will be well" You get the distinct feeling that both God and Abraham are aware that Sodom's reputation is so bad that the likelihood of there being fifty, out of a probable population of about a thousand or so is rather small.

"Fifty was just a round number, you understand; so what if that number is , say, five or so short; what then?"

"Yes, alright, if there are only forty five..."

And so on. It's a beautifully told story, whatever we may think about the picture of God it gives.

And let me say, here and now, that the picture of God it gives of one who destroys people as punishment for their sins couldn't be further from the God we worship here at St. Lawrence or at any other gathering of Christians anywhere in the world. We worship God as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, God made man, the Word made flesh, of one substance with the Father. A God who is Love. We do not believe in or worship and serve the God whom the writer of that story in the book of Genesis has portrayed.

That being the case, what can we possibly gain from having these stories contained in what we regard as Scriptures, the Bible, the 'word of the Lord', and, even more so, having them read out to us with such authority?

Well let me offer you a couple of 'thoughts for the day' which I derive from this one.

The first is that to develop our own personal faith in God we need to practice having conversations with God in much the same way as Abraham did. Not, of course, that we seriously expect to be standing face to face with God and presenting arguments to him in quite the same manner as Abraham does. But sharing our concerns with him, confiding in him our bewilderment sometimes that what he seems to allow goes against all that we would expect of the God of love and of justice – yes, sharing with him our doubts and our questions, as well as our faith and trust. His shoulders are broad enough.

The other thing is that the story of Abraham's bargaining with God raises the whole question of what Intercession is all about. Those of us who lead the intercessory prayers here at the Communion Service have recently been called together to face the challenge of what, exactly, do we think we are doing when we lead 'intercessory prayers'? Are we doing what Abraham appears to be doing, trying to persuade God to change his ways? Are we trying to get God to see things the way we see them? Are we telling God things about people and situations he must, surely, as God, already know? No, we all agreed, what we are trying to do is to put into words, in the presence of God, the concerns we all have about people and places and, at the same time, both offer ourselves to be the channels through which God might change things and to bring our own thoughts into line with his, not try to bring his mind into line with ours.

Now if you feel that preachers like myself, and others, are rather pushing things when we seem to find in some of these pre-Christian stories matters of relevance to our lives today, well don't let that put you off still savouring these Old Testament writings. Read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, enjoy them for what they are. Allowing the Bible as a whole to invade your minds and memories will almost certainly help to fashion and strengthen your own understanding and faith in the God we know in Christ.