

Trinity 6 sermon by Andrew 28 July 2019 The Father who sets free

Genesis 18: 20-32; Colossians 2: 6-15, 16-19; Luke 11: 1-13

Another great Abraham story this morning – this time Abraham like some East End market trader bargaining with God, starting off with fifty righteous men and eventually beating God down to ten. Del-boy himself could not have done better.

But the Gospel tackles the same question – how do you *deal with God*? How do you pray? How do you ask for things? Only from a slightly different stand point.

Now Abraham comes at this with the presupposition that God is a God of absolute justice. And it's almost as if he needs to reassure himself by asking: You won't wipe out the innocent with the guilty, will you? Surely not? Because if justice isn't tempered with mercy then I guess Abraham doesn't stand a chance and neither do we.

To dig a little deeper *into* the story, this is one of those texts beloved of the kind of fundamentalist that sees AIDS as divine judgement, but what is really under judgement here is any abuse, any enslavement of God's children. What's going on in Sodom is the exploitation of other people, which in this instance is men exploiting other men. But the judgement of God in the Bible is even-handed. The abuse of women in the temple prostitution of the Canaanite religions to which the Jewish people frequently succumbed was a key element in God having to start all over again with his people, taking them into exile to do it. Presumably those religions had more tangible attractions than the absolute purity of worship and the social justice demanded by an invisible God who had no idols and certainly none of those fertility rites that nowadays you probably couldn't even show on Channel 4.

So this isn't about sexuality of *any* kind. It's about living up to God's vision of what it really means to be human and to live the good life with the kind of freedom God wants for us. Almost the kind of freedom Adam enjoyed in the garden of Eden.

And in Abraham we get the first signs of seeing that relationship restored. Abraham actually gets it when everyone around him is still bowing down to idols, and still trusting in the ancient equivalent of your lucky rabbit's foot. What is God about? God's about justice and love. God's about covenant and promise. Abraham gets singled out in this great mythic drama, but it could just as easily be you or me. In the howling wilderness, in the terrible events of his own life, his marriage, his relationships – in every aspect of his amazing journey you see God stirring the waters of Abraham's life, leading him, disturbing him, challenging him, changing him – but in every stage of the journey being utterly faithful to him. Like the hound of heaven in the poem, Abraham just can't shake him off, and wouldn't even if he could, because he trusts him.

But for Abraham this God is such an almost terrifying wonder that he has no name for him. He knows him only as Yahweh, I AM – existence itself.

It takes Jesus to move this relationship to an even deeper level. When his disciples ask him how to pray, to be sure, Jesus teaches them to pray for God's justice, but they're to ask for it as you would go to the best, the most adoring of fathers. Now this isn't a model you see much in the Old Testament – anyone who demands a return to biblical family values doesn't know their Bible. The model of fatherhood passed from father to son by the patriarchs wouldn't bear imitating by anyone. Abraham must have left some deep scars on Isaac – that whole "you shall be the sacrifice, my son" thing; who in turn ruined things for Jacob through his favouritism towards Esau; which Jacob then perpetuated by his favouritism for Joseph – of the multi-coloured coat and the eleven angry brothers.

So Father as an image for God isn't automatic in the Old Testament, but Jesus puts this name for God in a place above all others. It's the name you cry out in anguish when the chips are down and your world is falling apart. In Gethsemane: Abba, Father, let this cup pass from me, but nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done. Maybe it's because Jesus had a wonderful father in Joseph, that strong, faithful, self-denying man from whom he must have learned so much. And you see it acted out in Jesus gathering children in his arms and saying to his disciples: Look, this is what it's all about. This is what a relationship with God looks like. It's a hug, an embrace, unconditional welcome by your Father.

What father among you, he says, can deny your children anything? This doesn't mean that God is some genie of the lamp who'll give you a win on the lottery or even the cure for an illness. But it does mean that the God who shares your very flesh wants nothing but your good and your freedom from any kind of enslavement. (Which takes us back to Abraham and Sodom, and Paul this morning: Let no-one take you captive). A glimpse of this freedom gifted by the Father makes it possible to seek the Kingdom of God – because when we learn to trust everything else falls into place.

Freddy Mercury used to sing: "I want to break free". And we all want that, each one of us in our different ways, but Jesus wants to show us what that freedom really looks like and it's this – to know I'm the child of a Father who just aches for us to come home. I have a friend who impishly describes prayer as "bothering God", but Jesus says you can never be a bother to God. We're to ask, seek, knock, because he's waiting for us.