

“Abraham – the Model of Faith”

(Genesis 12.1-9)

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Introduction

What does it mean to *have faith*? If we went into group discussion mode, what would you say? Many people answer by talking about what they *believe*... as in... “*I believe in God... I believe that Jesus is the Son of God etc. That’s my faith.*”

But *belief* is not a synonym for *faith*.

While belief is an influential component of faith, it is not in itself sufficient to be faith.

It is quite possible to believe, but not have faith.

Faith is both *more than*, and *different to*, belief.

So, how *would* we describe it?

The apostle Paul, taught that the OT patriarch, Abraham, was **the** model of what it meant to be faithful. (Romans 4.13-25) If you want a guide to being faithful, consider the story of Abraham... which is where our first reading takes us...

Abraham

Way, way back in time – perhaps 2,000 BCE – there was a Semitic pastoralist called Abraham¹ living somewhere in the Fertile Crescent, the so-called *cradle of civilisation* – perhaps in modern day Turkey. He’s an established prosperous man owning herds and slaves, and part of a significant family grouping in that region.

But then in his 70’s, Abraham hears the voice of a new god... a god so mysterious that there is no idol that can represent him... so unknown, that even his name is unspoken. He can only be called the LORD.

¹ Originally Abram... as in today’s text.

This previously unknown god, invites Abraham into a special relationship, promising him unimaginable blessing – that there is a land waiting for him... that he will be the father of many children, indeed the father of a great nation... that he will be known as a blessing to all the people of the earth.

When... where... how... did Abraham hear this divine voice speak to him? Was it in prayer, or the vast silence of the desert, or in the dark depths of night... was it in dreams or visions? We're not told.

But this LORD God announces himself so powerfully to Abraham, that when He tells him to... *“Leave your country, your family and your father’s home for a land that I will show you”*... Abraham does!

He leaves his old life – the land that had been his home... and the clan of extended family – and follows this vague promise of blessing.

It is this action – leaving an established life to journey to an unknown land... trusting in a divine promise that has no guarantee, no evidence of certainty, and no defined path – that Paul says is what it means to have faith.

Abraham leaves his established life behind, to journey with God to a promised land.

There’s a critical feature of this story hidden to our 21st century eyes.

In the ancient world, your personal security – your health, your wealth, your very survival – depended on the favours of the local gods of the land you lived in.

Each locality, each land had its own specific gods...

Each household had its gods – represented by idols in shrines strategically placed around the dwelling – which you kept onside by devotions, prayers and offerings. And in return, these deities kept you safe.

In following the call of this unknown god – the LORD – Abraham leaves behind his old familial gods, stepping beyond the zone of security they gave him. This is breath-taking risk!

And all this based on trust in a promise... that out there... somewhere... is a new land of abundant blessing and life... and that this new God will lead him there.

This Paul tells us, is what it means to have faith.

Our Lives

It happens in our lives...

Sometimes in disenchantment, depression, unhappiness...

Or sometimes when we're actually quite settled and established...

That we recognise that our life as it is, is simply not enough.

That for all its comforts and supposed securities, it is not the life we desire.

And we hear a voice whispering...

"Come and journey with me, and I'll lead you to a life overflowing with abundance and blessing."

Sometimes we discern this as the voice of GOD.

Paul teaches us that faith is like a journey.

It is the act of stepping away from an old life – our old attachments, old certainties – in order to follow the call of God to a life that is new... even though the promise is not defined or guaranteed.

Faith is the act of leaving behind the old familial idols – the convictions and beliefs adopted/learned/inherited in our early years. Leaving behind the narratives, assumptions and beliefs, that were supposedly going to keep us safe... make us happy.

Faith is journeying, following the sometimes-elusive whispers of GOD... exploring new territory... walking in places we've never been before.

And in such a journey, Paul says, *trust* is key...

Trust, that God does indeed love us...

Trust, that the life of blessing that God promises us, is there... waiting...

And trust, that God will lead... guide... and carry us... there.

This is faith – it is action, and it is choice.

We tend to speak of such turning-points dramatically. And to remember the BIG ones that come only occasionally in life.

But in reality, the act of faith, the choice of faith, comes repetitively through our lives... occasionally in BIG events... but often in the everyday choices... of choosing to trust in God.

Matthew

In today's Gospel (Matthew 9.9-13), a man called Matthew is at work in his tax collection station. We know nothing about this man, and can only speculate on what brings him to this place and time.

As a tax collector, he is hated for his collaboration with Roman occupation, and he is rejected as religiously unclean... and yet, the lucrative nature of his trade means he's likely to be wealthy. We assume that Matthew is a man who's come to an accommodation with life... This is who is he is, and this is what he does. This is his security – these are the 'gods' that keep him safe. He may be hated, he may be unclean, but this is world.

But somehow on *this* day, the voice of Christ penetrates this established accommodation of his old life...

and he feels/knows the depths of his own dissatisfaction...

and he hears the voice of promise...

"I can show you a better life. Follow me!"

And, incredibly, he does!

He walks away from his established life... to go on a journey that he knows little or nothing about... simply trusting that this is the voice of God, and the promise is true.

This is what it means to have faith.

Conclusion

As we sit here, depending on our degree of openness and presence, it won't be surprising if some of us are hearing the divine voice call.

"Come away with me.

Leave the certainties and securities of those old gods.

Journey with me... and I'll show you a land of unimaginable blessing and abundance."