

Sermon from online service – 05 July2020

In chapter 12 of Genesis, we read that God had made a promise to Abraham,

*'Look up at the heavens and count the stars,
if indeed you can count them,
so shall your offspring be'*

Would God be true to his promise? After all the long years of waiting and hoping, when it seemed God had forgotten or abandoned them, Sarah gives birth to a son.

But now, in today's scripture from Genesis chapter 24, Abraham is very old, his wife Sarah has died, and his son Isaac was about 40 years old and didn't have a wife. Abraham was concerned about this state of affairs. It was high time Isaac got to work on the next generation, and he needed a wife to do that! So Abraham decided to send his senior and most trusted servant to find a wife for Isaac. And today's reading from Genesis is about that journey and how Isaac found himself a wife, named Rebecca.

Abraham and his family were the odd ones out where they lived. Abraham's family had originally lived in a distant place called 'Ur', which was a prosperous city located in the south of what we would now call 'Iraq'. They travelled north up the Euphrates river, till they were close to where it had its source, and settled in a place called Haran. After living there for a while, Abraham received a call from God to travel south to what is often called the Promised Land. So they travelled south to Canaan, which was located in the same area that we now call 'Israel' and Palestine.

They had no family connections with anyone in Canaan, and to make matters more complicated, the Canaanites did not worship the Lord, and had many corrupt ways. So Abraham had two big issues to sort out. The first one was that he didn't want Isaac to marry a Canaanite woman. I suspect that he was concerned that Isaac and his descendants would be badly influenced if he married a Canaanite woman. Their family was a very small minority in their community, their faith and beliefs would be lost if they married the Canaanites. Abraham's second big concern was that Isaac might travel back to Haran in the north, where the rest of their family lived, seek his wife from there, and choose to remain there. This wouldn't do, because God had promised that the land of the Canaanites would one day belong to their own descendants. Isaac had to live in Canaan.

There was only one solution, thought Abraham. Abraham would send his most trusted servant back to their homeland to find a wife for Isaac. And he made the servant take a vow that that he would not get a wife for Isaac from among the Canaanites, and that he would not take Isaac back to the homeland in the north.

The concerns of Abraham may sound strange to us in Australia today, where marriages are rarely arranged, and where it is quite normal to marry people of different ethnic backgrounds. So perhaps we had better translate things a little when we look at this passage. Christians are increasingly becoming a minority in the community. Or at least, Christians who regularly go to church and profess the Christian faith are getting harder to find.

Abraham's concern about Isaac is probably what many Christian parents feel as they look at their children or grandchildren. What can we do to ensure that the Christian faith is not lost, but is instead passed on to the younger members of our families? We can't control who the children marry, and we can't make people associate with other people of Christian faith. What can we do?

Well, let's continue on our journey with Abraham's servant and see what we can learn. He left Canaan, taking with him ten camels, and travelled about 700 km north to their homeland in Haran. He stops at a well, just outside the town, around the time that the women go to the well, and prays something like this: *"Please, God, I'm going to ask one of them for a drink. Let the one who both gives me a drink and offers water to the camels, let that be the one you have chosen!"*

I know this might seem like a strange sign to ask for, but there is more to it than meets the eyes. This sign would reveal a woman with a spirit of hospitality and sensitivity, someone who goes the extra mile, and someone with strength and stamina, important qualities for life on the road. I

learned that a camel can drink up to 157 quarts—about 39 gallons—at a time. At ten camels, that turns out to be a lot of water!

But more importantly, God's hand was at work, for before he could finish praying, Rebekah came out with a jar on her shoulder and did just what he had prayed. And now comes the key point, which you could easily miss if you did not know the rest of the story and how Abraham came to end up in Canaan.

When Abraham's servant asks whose daughter she is, this is what she says,

'My father is Bethuel, the son of Nahor and Milkah'.

Nahor was Abraham's brother! In other words, Rebecca was Abraham's nephew's daughter.

As Abraham's servant acknowledged, the Lord led him on the journey to the house of his master's relatives. I won't go through the rest of the story, we know what happened next. Rebecca was willing to go back with Abraham's servant, and Abraham was very pleased with her and married her.

What can we learn from today's reading from Genesis? I have already mentioned that the problem Abraham faced is very much like the problem that modern day Christian parents face as they wonder how they can help pass on the Christian faith to their children. Perhaps we can learn from Abraham's determination to ensure that Isaac didn't marry a Canaanite woman. He wanted to make sure that Isaac was not drawn away from belief in the Lord, and so he took steps to make sure that Isaac found a wife from among his own people. His own faith, and the faith of all his descendants & the nation that would come from them, was a priority. It wasn't an added extra.

We can't determine whom our children marry, but we can seek to make sure that people that may lead them away from faith do not unduly influence them. Now of course, we also need to remember that people we might think of as being like us, and one of our own kind, can also lead us astray. Sometimes the people of faith that God uses are clearly outsiders. We need only to think of the example of Ruth to see that. The important thing is that our faith, and the faith of others, is something that God calls to be the priority in our life.

Each parent has to make their own decisions about how they are to go about this, but it is certainly worth noting that almost the first thing the servant does when he reaches that well and met Rebekah, was to bow down and pray in faith. It is clear that Abraham and his servant took their faith very seriously. Here is the story of a family of faith that was willing to be led by God, who expected God to lead, who watched for the signs of God's activity, interpreted and heeded them.

This is the invitation to each of us, and to our family of faith:

be willing to be led by God.

Expect God to lead.

Trust God to want what is best for us.

Get to know God's ways more and more deeply through scripture.

Keep a lookout for God's signs.

Carefully interpret them.

Act in faith.

And do all of this with prayer. Amen.