

Faith that intercedes

Genesis 18:16-33

Claire Morrish

Good morning Church – Let us pray before I begin,

Father God, creator of the universe, who loved the world so much he sent his only Son Jesus Christ to be our advocate in heaven, send now your Holy Spirit here to us, that we may encounter all your have for us in this passage. Amen

When my boys were younger and very, very occasionally now we would engage in the following dialogue – I love you, I love you 2, I love you 3, I love you 475, I love you 1 million 5 hundred and six, I love you to infinity and beyond.

I mention that as an opener to this passage as I think there is something of that in the conversation between Abraham and God. In asking, God – repeatedly if he would spare the city for 50, 45, 40, 30, 20 or 10 – Abraham is probing the mercy of God in a similar way to my boys affirming the nature of our love for each other.

There is much in this passage that is helping us understand the character of God and the nature of our relationship to God and it is passage that both contains many questions and generates many questions – in that way it reminded me of a weekend at a Sarum -my theological college. You arrive to study a topic with some questions you hope will be answered and you leave with more questions than you started with and that can seem unsettling but it is also part of the adventure – there is mystery in our faith and there is mystery in our passage today but the heart of the passage and the heart of our faith is the fact that our God invites us to ask questions because He loves us, made us in His image and fundamentally wants a relationship with us and good relationships involve the trust and the space to ask questions.

In this sermon series “Being the Blessing” – the story of Abraham – we have been following the building of trust and relationship between Abraham and God and today we see a beautiful glimpse into how that relationship has developed – such that rather like Adam in the garden of Eden at the beginning of Genesis – we find Abraham and God walking and talking together.

Last week we heard of Abraham's welcome of the 3 strangers. The identity of the 3 is somewhat mysterious but they include “The Lord” and possibly 2 angels – as the story unfolds the identity of the strangers does too.

We heard last week of Abraham's hospitality which included the washing of feet, (not detailed again in the bible until Jesus washes his disciples feet) and the preparation of a meal. This hospitality is extended in their departure as Abraham offers to walk with them the first part of their journey – its abit like us saying – let me walk you to the car or to the bus stop – Abraham wants to be with these visitors as long as possible and give them his full attention as long as possible.

Abraham recognised from the beginning when he fell at their feet that these were no ordinary visitors. They have brought him the promise from God that Sarah will conceive and by next year bear a son. Abraham has recognised that he is in the presence of the Lord. As he accompanies them on their journey towards Sodom, home town of his nephew Lot, the Lord shares with Abraham his thoughts about the city of Sodom that they can see in the distance. Surely this level of sharing is provoking questions from Abraham.

As we do with trusted friends – we might say – I am thinking of applying for a new job ... we share a plan with a trusted friend – provoking questions because we want their view. The Lord shares with Abraham the “out cry” that has reached him about Sodom and his plans to check out the city and destroy it if necessary.

The love of Abraham for his nephew and hearing God's plan is a crisis moment for Abraham – in Abraham there is a confusion or cognitive conflict moment. How can the Lord he knows to be a just and righteous Judge – destroy a whole city in which Abraham believes there are a few righteous people including his nephew Lot and family. So he intercedes - he questions and probes God's character, hoping to better understand God's actions and bring to God's attention the plight of the righteous ones.

To intercede – literally means “to go between” (Latin : inter =between and cedere – to go) So Abraham is daring to go - between God and the city of Sodom. It is similar to words such as mediator and advocate – people who facilitate disputes between groups and try to bring reconciliation – but intercede literally means go between – there is a sense in which you are not pleading a cause or aiming to change a decision but literally to be in the situation and better understand it, or bring light into the situation for both parties.

Have you ever felt a crisis moment like Abraham did here – where there is a confusion between your understanding of God's character and your experience of what you perceive as God's actions or lack of actions are in a situation? - I know I have – it often emerges as a question – something like – How could God let that happen? These are the moments for interceding in prayer – literally go in between – placing yourself between God and the situation. - in the hope of better understanding God and of deepening your relationship.

Let's see how Abraham does it – so we can learn how we can do it too.

Firstly Abraham has gained time with “The Lord” by offering radical hospitality to strangers – he has even washed their feet!

The writer of the NT book of Hebrews puts it this way:

Hebrews 13

13 Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. 2 Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

Secondly Abraham, recognises who God is and approaches his moment to ask questions with respect and care

He recognises God as Judge of all the earth and his own position as dust and ashes.

23 Then Abraham approached him and said: 'Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 24 What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare[c] the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? 25 Far be it from you to do such a thing – to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?'

He later describes himself as I am nothing but dust and ashes v 27

And also later uses phrases such as May the Lord not be angry with me and if I may so bold as to speak...

Thirdly – He tests the measure of God's mercy as he repeatedly reduces the number of righteous people – it's a little by little approach – in the approach you can see how risky it feels for Abraham.

We however have a great advantage over Abraham in that Abrahams faith was not secured by the knowledge and example of God's love for the world that we have access to in the life, teachings of, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's only son.

Abraham's story is right at the start of the Bible – He is fundamental to God's rescue plan – it is from his descendants that Jesus will be born but Abraham doesn't know any of this when he has his conversation about the extent of God's mercy for Sodom.

Another aspect of God's character that I don't want us to miss from this passage is that of God's patience and God's seeking of evidence before judgement action.

In verse 20-21

20 Then the Lord said, 'The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous 21 that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.'

So here we see that others have interceded about Sodom and alerted God to the sinfulness of the people there but he doesn't just act and destroy the city straight away – he is sending the other 2 mysterious strangers into the city to gather evidence. We know God has the bigger picture in ways we will never understand but this intriguing episode shows that our out-crys to God are part of how God builds his bigger picture and that he also sends down angels. The 2 men are referred to as angels at the start of chap 19, not just to deliver messages but also to gather evidence.

The outcome of Abrahams interceding faith are described in chapters 19 to 21, which we are not covering directly in our sermon series as they include some very adult content – do read ahead and ask God your own questions about those episodes. In essence there are not 10 righteous men to be found in Sodom, but Lot, Abrahams nephew whose status as righteous is dubious given some of his actions in the story, is rescued from the city before it is destroyed – infamously Lot's wife is turned into a pillar of salt – when she failed to follow God's instruction not to look back.

So to summarise

Abraham's radical hospitality leads him into the Lord's presence.

He prioritises lingering with the Lord.

He and the Lord build a relationship of trust where questions are invited.

Abraham's faith in the Lord allows him to intercede that is to go between The Lord and Sodom. There with questions that probe the extent of God's mercy – little by little, with respect – aware he is talking to the Judge of the whole earth.

We stand in a privileged position compared to Abraham as we live after the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our faith is built on the evidence of the gospels and the testimony of all the followers of Christ that followed him. We are here today worshipping in a building where generations have followed Christ and discovered the power of a faith that intercedes.

A faith that goes between, because in Jesus we know a God that goes between heaven and earth to establish a better relationship with us, to reconcile us, to remove from us the sin that began in the garden of Eden and provide for us a way back to walking and talking with the one Jesus describes as Our Father.

Different New testament letters describe this:

Ephesians 2 v 13

13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Hebrews 7 v 24-25

24 but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. 25 Therefore he is able to save completely[c] those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

This gives us a confidence beyond that of Abraham – in the book of Hebrews we read:

1. Hebrews 4:16

Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

2. 1 John 5:14

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.

What is more – sometimes there are no words for our interceding and for those moments we have the gift of the Holy Spirit – described in Romans 8 v 26 as interceding for us:

26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. 27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

So in Jesus we see our "Go between God"

Jesus has gone between heaven and earth and has made a way through life and death to an eternal life with God for us.

Because of all that Christ has done for you, you can have a faith that like Abraham intercedes – that is goes between situations and God.

We can do that with confidence.

So like Abraham – welcome strangers, draw near to God, bring to God the issues of this world with all its questions, rely on the power of the Holy Spirit when you have no words.

If you have not yet started this kind of faith adventure –this kind of re then today is the day – do come forward for prayer – there are people here that would love to intercede with you and for you.

Come and ask questions to find out – how much God loves you.

Amen