

Dalziel St. Andrew's Parish Church : Motherwell
Sunday 29th January 2012 Genesis 12: 1-20

Did you ever play “*Happy Families*” when you were a child? The card game, I mean, rather than the real thing! You may recall that the original pack of cards included such stars as “*Mr. Bun the Baker*” and “*Mrs. Bud the Florist.*” However, did you know that a new version has been put on the market to reflect modern times? Included are such characters as “*Miss Zero, the Supermodel*” and “*Mr. Hedge-fund, the city fat-cat*” and “*Miss Apple, who lives her life on Facebook*” – it’s true, you couldn’t make it up! ☺

As we journey through the Book of Genesis in our **E100** studies, we reach the stories about *Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*. In a sense, it’s a bit like a game of “*Happy Families.*” The only difference is that they are not always happy. Neither, indeed, are they perfect! However, one thing is clear, despite their very obvious faults and failings, each one is used by God to further His will and purpose.

So, let’s start with Abraham (or, Abram, as he was originally named!) In chapter 12, we hear how he is called by the LORD – “*Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.*” (1) That call of God to Abram is heavy on the detail of what he has to say farewell to, but rather sketchy when it comes to his destination. Therefore, it takes real faith for Abram to hear and heed the LORD’s call upon his life. It is going to cost him to follow where God is leading. And, when I say that, I don’t mean materially, at least not at this juncture, but emotionally. Verse 5 makes clear that Abram took all of his possessions with him. Yet, it must have been heartrending to leave the security of his neighbourhood, friends and wider family behind as he set out on his travels. Of course, there was considerable compensation for his trouble, as put forward in God’s promise to him: “*I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.*” (2-3)

Nevertheless, we mustn’t forget that to receive those promises was an act of belief and trust on Abram’s part. Verse 30 of chapter 11 tells us: “*Sarai was barren, she had no children.*” When you put that together with the fact that “*Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out*” (4), you begin to understand just how much faith he exercised. However, as I mentioned earlier, Abram was not flawless – “*Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while...as he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, ‘I know what a beautiful woman you are...say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared...’*” (10-13) In the space of a few sentences, Abram butters his wife up, and then offers her up; he demonstrates disobedience (why was he even in Egypt?) and a distinctive cowardice (watching his own back!) This guy, who is heralded as a true man of faith by three world religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam), almost falls at the first hurdle. Needless to say, his CV is motley and would include hesitancy, telling lies, and making a profit under false pretenses. Yet, I remind you, this is the very chap whom God has selected to be the start of a nation, He is proud to call His people. And, ultimately, from this man’s line comes the Saviour of the world! The message is clear – nobody is a lost cause in God’s hands.

As the rest of Abram’s story unfolds, this rollercoaster ride continues – honestly, the ups and downs of his faith would make any self-respecting believer nauseous. He moves from doing the right thing by his nephew, Lot, to infidelity with a maidservant (at the insistence of his wife!), which produces a child (Ishmael), thus initiating the centuries-long tussle between Arab and Jew! Showing hospitality to angels, gives way to interceding before God for wicked Sodom and Gomorrah, then welcoming a child (Isaac) at the age when Abraham

should have been receiving a telegram from the Queen (if you know what I mean!) And, this can only be topped (if you'll excuse the pun) by offering Isaac up for sacrifice to God, followed by the death of his long-suffering wife, Sarah! Who said the Bible is dull or tedious? ☺ Far from it!

Things settled for a time as Isaac took a wife and started a family of his own. The name, Isaac, means "he laughed," which is literally what Abram did on discovering his elderly wife, Sarai, was pregnant! Sadly, the levity was short-lived as Isaac's wife, Rebekah, went from childlessness to bearing twins, who even vied for the upper whilst in their mother's womb (25:22). Unfortunately, things got little better once the boys (Jacob and Esau) were born into the world. Esau was the eldest and became a hunter, while Jacob was more of a home-bird (25:27). Their parents, playing a game of favourites (25:28) didn't help matters – Isaac favoured Esau, and Rebekah preferred Jacob. Subterfuge of the highest order followed, and a plot was hatched that would not be out of place in some modern-day whodunit!

They say that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach – Rebekah and Jacob understood and exploited that truism, preparing a delicious beef stew for Esau. Then, Jacob pretended to be his brother, even dressing up for the part, in order to cheat his ailing father (Isaac) into giving him the blessing, which was really the birthright of the eldest son (Esau). Again, I say, can you believe that this is the same family God chose to be the genesis of a new nation to be called His people? And, from such deceitful descendants as this came the One Who was to be known as the Way, the Truth and the Life – Jesus Christ! Truly, the LORD is a forgiving, merciful and miracle-working God, Whose love for mankind is amazing, and Whose desire to bring them back into a living relationship with Himself is not to be thwarted.

May I remind you that God watched as all of this scheming unfolded. How tempting it must have been to send another flood and cleanse the world of all that wickedness. But, He did not. I'm sure you recall that He had promised precisely never to do such a thing again (9:11) – the LORD had to work with the materials at His disposal. When Jacob flees the scene to escape the wrath of his brother, God follows. An unsettled night's sleep at Bethel, led Jacob to recognise that God was not finished with him yet.

This is something of a conversion experience for Jacob, who made a vow, saying, *"If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, then the LORD will be my God..."* (28: 20-21) Of course, as with all of us, this was just one step on the journey to becoming completely useful to God in fulfilling His purposes. It was not the only sleepless night Jacob experienced. At a place called Peniel (32: 22-32), Jacob wrestled with God and lived to tell the tale. And, although he physically limped thereafter, Jacob's spirit became stronger as a result of the struggle. Reconciled to the brother he had cheated, Jacob famously gave rise to twelve sons, who formed the basis of the twelve tribes of Israel (Jacob's new name, and the way in which God's chosen people would be described thereafter!) And, from that same family comes the wonderful story of Joseph (to which we will return in a fortnight with E100).

But, before we leave Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, let's firm up on a few things God may be saying to us. First of all, the mess mankind often makes of things is not irredeemable, for nothing is impossible with the LORD. Secondly, those whom God chooses as His servants don't have to be perfect in every way – broken people are God's specialty. Thirdly, despite his shortcomings, the main thing Abraham got right was faith – albeit, at times, an uncertain and shaky faith. Fourthly, the stories of these three great Patriarchs, remind us

that God can use even the detours we take in life to teach us things and take forward His will for the world.

God is in the business of changing people. Over time, He not only alters Abram and Jacob's names, but their characters are transformed too. And, the LORD is not into a "*quick fix*," but the radical and lasting reformation of people. And finally, here's a closing thought. In light of what we have been reading in the narratives about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, perhaps it is time for us to stop asking God to change our circumstances and, instead, pray that He will use those situations to change us for the better!