

Sunday 18th June

Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7

Romans 5:1-5

Matthew 9:35-10:8

Fathers Day

As we have heard, today is Father's Day. So I guess it is fitting that our first reading should be about someone – in this case Abraham – becoming a father. It's the story of the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah in their old age.

The context is important here. When we first meet Abraham in the Bible back in Genesis 11 we are told that he and Sarah could have no children. Sarah was barren. Yet Abraham is called to leave his homeland and to set out to wherever God would lead him. To step into the unknown. And the call was confirmed to Abraham by a promise that he would become the father of a great nation. That his descendants would be as numerous as the grains of sand on the seashore or the stars in the sky. But Sarah was barren so how could this be?

This tension between the certain promise and the impossibility of its realisation underpins all the stories, all we read about Abraham from that call to today's reading.

As we read through the chapters we see God reminding Abraham of the promise; Abraham doubting it and trying to sort things himself, then God restating the promise.

And we then read today of the visit of three strangers who Abraham greets outside his tent. There was something very special about them that Abraham recognised. He calls them Lord. As the reading continues there is some confusion as to whether there are three or just one visitor. Some say it is the trinity in evidence here. I'm not sure if that's the case – but what we can say for certain is that this is a divine visitation to Abraham. Something important is going on. God has a message. And interestingly, as we shall see, the message is really for Sarah rather than Abraham.

But its Abraham that makes these divine strangers welcome – he prepares a sumptuous feast for them; he offers them rest and refreshment.

Then the strangers speak. They ask where Sarah is, and declare in her hearing that by this time next year she would have a son.

Sarah – out of sight in the tent, but well within earshot - laughs – but this is not laughter of joy at the news. Rather it is laughter at the impossibility of it all. She has heard before of this promise of a child and nothing has happened. She is still barren. So she laughs at the prospect that she - an old woman – is to have a child. Its not the first time we hear of laughter at this news. In the previous chapter as God reminded Abraham of the promise we read that Abraham fell on his face and laughed. Its all too impossible and ridiculous. Laughable. Laughing at the word and promise of God. A dangerous business.

Here the stranger challenges Sarah and she denies the laughter – but the closing words from the stranger are ones for us to ponder – ***Is anything too wonderful for the Lord.*** We could paraphrase as ***Nothing is impossible with God.***

The final part of our Old Testament reading comes a year or so after the first part.

The promised son has been born. God has brought about the wonderful, the seemingly impossible. A son has been born to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. And Sarah laughs again.

This time it is not laughter at the thought of the impossible, but a laughter that marks the end of the waiting, an end of the sorrow and the weeping; an end of the humiliation and the disgrace of being childless. A laughter at the wonderful revelation that God has done what he had promised and what she had doubted. She has borne a child. A laughter marking celebration and deep joy. Laughter that becomes the very name of the child – the name Isaac means ***he laughs***. Perhaps whenever Sarah called her son by his name she was reminded of her laughter – both of incredulity and of joy. Her laughter at the impossibility of the promise and the joy of seeing it fulfilled.

Of course there's another story in the Bible of a divine message about the birth of a child being brought to a woman. Its again a story of a child long promised – this time promised through God's words spoken by Old Testament prophets; God's words of a new king from the line of David. It's a story where the message sounds just as implausible – however, its not an aged mother this time, but a young woman who is still a virgin. It's a message that ends once again with those self same words from the messenger ***Nothing is impossible with God.***

But this time in our well known Christmas story the young woman – Mary of course – believes the amazing news and responds not with mocking laughter but with the glorious affirmation ***may it be to me according to your word.*** Perhaps afterwards she could laugh with joy privately as she sang ***surely all generations shall call me blessed.***

Two messages . Two very different reactions.

Sarah – who couldn't quite see beyond what she knew and had experienced. Who couldn't quite imagine God doing some so extraordinary and wonderful. Whose vision of God simply wasn't big enough – the God she believed in was limited by her own imagination and her lack of faith.

And then there was Mary - who, even though she found it hard to comprehend the message; even though she dared to question the message (***how can this be for I am a virgin?***); even though she had good reasons a plenty not to believe - she still believed. ***And through the very act of believing her vision of God and her faith grew – witness the wonderful words of the Magnificat – the mighty one has done great things for me and holy is his name***

Its worth noting of course that God achieved his purpose in both situations. Both promises came to be. Both births marked God doing new things that changed the world. Both mothers rejoiced and both were blessed.

But I cant help thinking how much more Sarah could have grown if only she believed and trusted. If only she took those words ***Nothing is impossible with God*** at face value.

SO I apologise for majoring on two mothers on this fathers day. Of course both Abraham and Joseph were essential to Gods purposes – they were not in the least casual observers. We could have looked at the many times God spoke to Abraham – known as the friend of God, or the divine messages Joseph received about the child and his part in his upbringing.

But I am sure they too, along with both Sarah and Mary and, I hope, each one of us can take to heart the message that nothing is impossible with God and that we would do well to trust God rather than limit him.

That is true for us individuals and as churches. In the way both we and this parish are moving forward in our walk with God. Nothing is impossible with God – we trust into God’s hands all we are and all that we will be through his grace.