

Sunday 7th August

Genesis 15:1-6

Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16

Luke 12:32-40

Where your treasure is there shall your heart be

A few years ago we went to Ethiopia to visit Kate's son Ally and his wife Sophie while they were living and working there. One of our excursions took us to the Simien mountains – a beautiful and awe inspiring landscape, far away from any cities or large towns – where we spent a night. The night was clear. And as we looked up to the dark skies we had that amazing experience where the longer you look, the more stars seem to appear. Bright ones first, then, as your eye acclimatises to the light, more and more stars begin to appear, till at last it seems that there is no dark sky, just millions upon millions of stars. The incredible size and depth of creation becomes plain for all to see. Perhaps you have had a similar experience on a clear night when away from the light pollution of the cities.

And I was reminded of that night in the Simien mountains as I read the passage from Genesis today when God asks Abraham to look at the stars in the sky and try to count them. Your descendants – he says - will be like these. Countless. Like all of my promises – says God – the more you look into them the more you will see.

Our OT reading is one of many incidents in the story of Abraham where he almost seems to be bargaining with God, or arguing with God – such is the closeness of his relationship. God reminds him about the promise he had made to Abraham – not only of his descendants without number but also the promise of land – the promise that was at the centre of Israel's early history. The promised land.

But Abraham questions how this could be since he and his wife Sarah were still childless. As things stood there would be no descendants to inherit the promise and so the promise itself would be worthless.

God simply reminds Abraham of the promise. And to give him a visual reminder of the promise and its scope he takes him to look at the stars. Count the stars if you are able – such will your descendants be. The promise is secure. Because God – the creator of the heavens and the stars – is the one behind it. There is an implicit call for Abraham to trust in this promise. And the reading ends with some well known words as Abraham does indeed place his trust in God – *Abraham believed the Lord and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness*. Words that are used throughout the Bible as an example of faith.

When we think about it nothing had really changed. Abraham was still childless; he and Sarah were still old. Yet he had moved from doubting the promise to believing it. What was it then that changed him? Why did he turn from doubt to trust?

Maybe it was the night sky. The picture God had given him. The fact that he now had this visual reminder of the promise. Whenever he looked up he would remember the words of

God – *Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be.*

Visual reminders of promises are very important – at the centre of our church marriage service for example is the exchange of rings. Visual reminders to husband and wife of the promises they make. Visual reminders of those words of love and commitment.

Maybe we find it hard to believe the wonderful promises God makes to us. We know some of the promises, but we find it hard to trust them. Or perhaps it's that sometimes we can believe, but at other times we just don't seem to be able to.

Abraham was no different. Despite his declaration of faith that we read about in today's reading, just a few chapters later he was doubting the promise again and trying to sort things out himself. The sorry tale of him having a child through his wife's slave girl, with all the hurt and pain that caused. Once more God spoke to him and gave him another reminder of the promise – this time something much more physical. Circumcision. A permanent reminder for him. He also changed his name from Abram to Abraham – meaning father of many. Everyday reminders of the promise.

Abraham – like us – was on a journey of faith. He had high points and low points. Times of closeness to God, times when he seemed to be further away. He had times when he got things badly wrong, and times when following God was much easier. Times when he trusted in God and his promises, and times when he found he could only place his trust in himself.

But Abraham is known as the friend of God. Despite his weaknesses, despite his mistakes, despite his lack of trust he is still held up as an example of faith, and example of a most intimate and honest relationship with God. Despite his failings – or perhaps because of them.

For me he is the kind of person I can relate to. Someone who longs to trust in God, who longs to be the faithful friend and servant, but who somehow and all too often gets things wrong and makes a mess because he can't seem to be able to fully trust in God.

In what or in whom do you put your trust?

This is the question Jesus is really asking us in the gospel when he says. *Where your treasure is there your heart will be also*

When things are hard – or even when they are not – in whom or what do we trust. Do we rely on ourselves to sort things out, or do we trust in God and his promises? We probably know some of God's amazing promises - to be with us always; to listen when we pray; to give us good things and bless us; to fill us with his Spirit, his life within us, and so to lead us to fullness of life – life as it really should be lived. And yet we often doubt him and live as if those promises did not exist.

Trusting in God takes second place to trusting in ourselves or in things we can see and touch and count. Money, abilities, possessions, health, family, security. We find it hard to trust in a God we cannot see. It's much easier to put our trust in things that we can see. Not that there's anything wrong with any of those things in themselves – they are all gifts from God. It's just that they can easily become the whole purpose of our lives – taking over from God if you like.

God gave Abraham visual reminders of his promises – the stars in the sky, the grains of sands on the seashore and circumcision itself. What reminders has he given us of his great promises? What things can we look to so that we can remain faithful?

Our baptism. Perhaps when we look at the font as we come into church we are reminded of the promises of God – and the promises we made or others made on our behalf to follow him and trust him. At baptism services I encourage people to take the opportunity to renew their baptism vows.

Just as Abraham was given a new name, Christian names were originally given at baptism to be a reminder of the promises made. Christian names that often had meaning – just as Abraham's new name had a significant meaning. Perhaps less so now, but it is still possible to take in a new name at baptism and also at confirmation. Reminders of promises.

But we can also be reminded of God's great promises when we celebrate communion – A reminder of the promises of God in Jesus, promises that declare that we can receive forgiveness and a new start. That we can have the fulness of life that Jesus promised.

We can also be reminded of God's promises because we are part of a welcoming and loving community – the church. A number of people who are fairly new to church have said to me how they have been encouraged and helped by the friendliness and love shown by members of church to them. So be encouraged by that!

And lastly the example of others. We can look back in our own lives at those whose faith has meant something special to us; we can look at characters from the Bible as we have been doing this morning. The reading from Hebrews, for example, is the start of a longer section recalling the great heroes of faith throughout the Bible. We can also be encouraged in our faith through sharing stories with each other – one reason why sharing our WOW moments in church can be so helpful. We see God's promises being fulfilled in others and that encourages us to trust in them too.

But the best reminder we have of God's promises is surely the person of Jesus. That Hebrews passage looking at great Biblical characters ends by saying that we should look primarily to Jesus. Jesus - the perfect example of living and the reason for our faith. Jesus – the one who shows us what life should be like and what God is like. Jesus - the one who through his life and death and resurrection lives out God's promises and encourages us to do the same. Jesus our example, our rock, our beginning and end, our reason for being. our treasure – and where our treasure is there shall our heart be.

Where is your treasure?

