

Genesis 15 (and Galatians 3:7-9 and 14)

If you start reading the Bible in one go and at a good speed, it seems to be easy to believe in miracles. In Genesis 11 we are told that Abram's wife 'Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive'; in Genesis 12 Abram is promised many descendants and you turn a few pages in your Bible and they have a child, in Genesis 21!

However, there were many, many years of waiting between the promise in Genesis 12 and its fulfilment. To give you an idea: in Genesis 16, Abram is 86, but in Genesis 17, he is 99, and still no child is born to him and his wife. How would Abram have experienced those long years of waiting? How would daily life have been for Abram and his wife throughout all those years?

How much did Abraham know about God anyway? God had called him from Ur to leave his country and go to the land God would show him. He had left behind this city of Ur where many other gods were worshipped, but he did not yet know much about God, who called him. He did not have a Bible, he did not know the full story of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, he did not know that the author of the letter to the Hebrews would take him as an example of faith. Nor did he know that the apostle Paul would see him as the father of all believers, not saved by works but by faith. Abram did not know all these things, the only thing he was given were God's promises, and they were not fulfilled yet.

There are quite a few years in between the significant events in Abram's life. The times when God spoke to him are recorded, but there were many years in between. Years in which not many spectacular things happened, years of waiting for the promise of a son to be fulfilled.

We sometimes forget this waiting time. We think Abram was a hero of faith who always lived an exciting life in the presence of God. But there were many years of waiting and just living the life of a wandering nomad before Abram saw the fulfilment of the promises God had made in Genesis 12. When we get to the end of the Book of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus, we know there are many descendants, but in all the chapters we read at the moment, the promise is still not fulfilled.

We have a lot more to live by than Abram did. We have got promises on paper, we have the Bible, the Holy Spirit living in us, and yet there are also many moments in our life when we just ... 'live in the presence of God'. Some Christians live from one exciting moment to the other. They always expect new and greater things to happen. They like going to big events, where 'things happen', so to speak. On the one hand it is good to look forward to what God is doing and will do. And of course, it's marvellous when we can meet with many Christians and sing together – something we missed so much during lockdown.

Yet on the other hand we have to learn to live our daily life in God's presence, just holding on to the promise ... the promise of a new world to come, of righteousness being restored, of Jesus coming back to make an end to all injustice.

When we live our daily life, the 'ordinary life' as I would call it, we do experience blessings: in the seasons of nature, in the provision of food, clothing, a home to live in, friendships and family... But not everything in the life of a Christian is always exciting and awesome and fantastic. There are times of 'just getting on with your life' and just thanking God for 'normal' things.

As my father once said to me: we just have to learn to walk with God.

No extraordinary events all the time, just being faithful in praying, in Bible reading, in going to church and seeking Christian fellowship.

And then there are the special moments when God turns something in our life upside down – the day when I took the decision to be baptized – which is 50 years ago next week and I've never regretted it. The night I surrendered my life to Jesus to be baptized, I couldn't sleep – so happy was I. There are encounters with God on the way and today we read about one.

Today, we read about one of these special moments when God spoke directly to Abram. 'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.' (verse 1).

Initially, Abram does not sound very pleased with these words, because he probably does not know what to think of God's words. If 'his reward will be very great', as we can translate these words, why doesn't he have an heir, a son of him and Sarai – just as God had promised?

In Genesis 15, the chapter we read today, we are not much further than in Genesis 12, as I said before: no heir, no 'great nation' as Abram's descendants, as God had promised him. No land was his own yet...

So, no wonder Abram asks God questions: verse 2 and verse 3.

Apparently, there is space for asking questions. God does not tell Abram off for doing that.

It is interesting that the relationship between God and Abram is a mutual one. Abram asks questions, although he acknowledges that God is much greater than he is ('Sovereign LORD'). Yet Abram dares to ask questions, to enter into a dialogue with God and he does that twice: in verses 2-3 and verse 8.

This is not the only time people in the Bible ask God questions and it happens several times when someone is called, like Moses or Jeremiah. God makes his plans known, but – they ask him – what about this and what about that? And it is fascinating that these questions are taken seriously by God. I think this is one of the exciting things concerning our faith in this God of Abram, Isaak, Jakob, John, Paul (etcetera): that he is a God who wants to enter into a relationship with us. He is not remote and distant, somewhere high up in the sky, a god you never speak to in a personal way. Neither is he a god who remains mysterious and whose plans you never get to know, you remain unsure about all your life. On the contrary, he is the God who makes his decisions known to people. He enters into a relationship with Abram and makes his plans about the future known to him. And apparently it is o.k. for Abram to ask questions. These are not questions of doubt here, but still they are questions and God deals with them.

In the first half of Genesis 15, Abram is asking questions about 'inheritance' and the fact that he still has no son who can inherit from him. Will God's promises be fulfilled through his servant Eliezer or will they end at Abram's death? God assures him that the promise in Genesis 12 still stands. He leads Abram outside and look at the heavens to count the stars: so many descendants will he have – they cannot be counted.

In the second half, Abram is asking about the promise of the land, and God confirms that the land where he lives at that particular moment, will once be his.

As for both promises, we know that they were fulfilled. Abram did get a son, whom his own wife Sara, bore to him. And look how many descendants of Abraham there are – look at the Jewish people who came from this family! In history, people have tried to blot out the Jews, but they never succeeded!

And in a spiritual way, we as believers in Christ are also the descendants of Abram. That's what Paul emphasizes in the New Testament: just as Abram believed God and was counted as righteous, so we are saved by our faith in Jesus Christ.

What does it mean when it says that Abraham believed the Lord God?

He confirms that God is reliable, that he trusts Him.

In this respect, Abram, or Abraham as he is later called, is an example for us. He wasn't always, as we heard in the sermon of a few weeks ago, when he lied about his wife being his sister. Yet in this case, Abram trusting that God's words will become true, he is an example for us.

And for us, believers in the 21st Century, there are so many more reasons to trust the Lord and his promises. We have a Bible full of stories of God doing what he promised. The descendants of Abraham did arrive in the promised land, the Messiah whose birth was foretold in the Old Testament, did come. Jesus fulfilled many promises from the Old Testament in his life, his death and his resurrection.

So for us today, there is all the more reason to believe and trust in God and his promises.

In the Hebrew language, the word for 'trust in God' is from the same verb as the word 'amen'. So Abraham says 'amen', 'yes' to God's promises. He believes that they will one day be fulfilled, he confirms that God is reliable.

Genesis 15 shows us that God takes the initiative to have a relationship with Abram, but it also shows us that Abram says 'amen' to that.

In Jesus Christ, God invites us to enter into a relationship with him and to trust him. Do we say 'amen' to his invitation? And do we live with his promises for the future, even though it may be many years before Jesus will return?

We have a whole book of stories of people trusting in God. Let us follow in their footsteps by living our daily lives in God's presence.

Amen