

Genesis 18:1-15 A great God Genesis 21:1-7

This week I read a book on preaching, which told me: In a sermon you should only make one point. However, I found three points in the passage for today, so there are two which I can't share with you.

I am therefore not going to tell you about the great lesson in hospitality in verses 2-8. Here the focus is on Abraham, who is shown in his Ancient Near Eastern culture. Abraham is sitting in front of his tent in the heat of day. He is a wandering nomad, obviously rich, with servants and herds. You can feel the atmosphere. At this hot time of the day three unexpected guests arrive. Still, they are welcome. The tone of their conversation is formal, polite. Abraham is hospitable and helps his guests to wash their feet because of the dust. He then modestly offers them 'a bit of bread', which turns out to be a full meal that even includes a fat calf! Behind the scenes Abraham rushes around despite the heat.

Giving the best to your guests is also what we are trying to do in Renew Wellbeing. Abraham sets us an example. This kind of hospitality is common in many parts of the world and we in Britain can learn from it. (After the sermon Sohan told me that he knows this custom from India.)

Because I can only make one point, I am also not telling you how well-written this story is, and I can't show you the slides I prepared. For the big question here is: who are these three visitors? Verse 1 gives it away to us as readers, but Abraham does not know that one of them is the LORD.

Verse 1 says 'The Lord appeared to Abraham', but according to verse 2 Abraham merely sees 'three men standing nearby'. In verse 3 he speaks to them accordingly: 'If I have found favour in your eyes, my lord ...' 'Sir', Abraham says. But unexpectedly in verse 9 they ask him: 'Where is your wife Sarah?' How do they know his wife's name? And then in verse 10, 'one of them said, 'I will surely return to you ... and Sarah your wife will have a son.' These are words that a human would not say. And so in verse 13 Abraham knows: 'Then the LORD said to Abraham ...' It has gradually become clear who these three are, but is only in 19:1 that the other two visitors are called angels.

Let me instead of these two things speak about how great God is, because in verses 9-15 we do meet a great God. We know him previously in Genesis as the creator of heaven and earth, and the one who called Abraham to leave his homeland to travel to a new land. Here he comes very close, he comes to visit, he comes for tea. This great God is able to adopt a human form and go incognito. And he repeats his important promise that Abraham and Sarah will have a son and then many descendants.

God's grace here in this story is in stark contrast with his judgment in the next episode, Genesis 19. There he has to punish the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. It is clear that God would rather not punish! Here he brings grace.

In verse 14 we have the important question: 'Is anything too hard for the LORD?' No, obviously nothing. God can do what he wishes. That is almost the same saying as in Luke 1:37, that nothing is impossible for God. He can give Sarah a son in her old age, he can give Mary a child although she is a virgin. He can save because he wants to save. The birth of Isaac points forward to God's gracious intervention in Jesus, the Saviour. God keeps his promises. If we are disappointed about him, that might be because we expect things he did not promise us, such as prosperity and permanent good health.

We often say 'God is good' when we see God in action, but that is subjective. God is always good, regardless of how we feel or whether we receive what we hope for.

God does what is right and he is the absolute standard of righteousness! And he is able to keep his promises. He gave Isaac to Abraham and Sarah (see 21:1-7), he gave Jesus to save the world, and he will bring about the new heavens and new earth which are promised in the Bible.