

**LOOK UP AT THE STARS!**  
*Abraham, our ancestor in faith*

**WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?**

I love finding out about my family history.

Like most people, I suppose.

Hence the enormous popularity of programmes like *'Who do you think you are?'*

It seems the more mobile we are, the more we long to know where we have come from.

Such history roots us in the past,

more importantly it tells us something about who we are now.

But perhaps that knowledge also shapes who we become in the future.

The letter to the Hebrews is trying to do something similar.

It places Christ in a succession of Jewish ancestors to show where he stands in the family.

The second reading today missed out the verses about Abel and Enoch and Noah –

Choosing instead to focus on the last and greatest of the Jewish patriarchs – Abraham himself.

**WHO IS ABRAHAM?**

To Christians, Abraham (or Abram as he's also called) often seems a bit like one of those distant relatives,

You feel you should definitely get to know better,

But never quite seem to get round to meeting up with.

We know he's an important part of the family,

But we're not quite sure where he fits in or who he is.

But if we read Genesis from chapter 11 to 25

We find a man who is from the ancient city of Ur in Mesopotamia.

He is called a patriarch because he is the leader of a tribe,

And lived a semi-nomadic existence, moving from place to place within a limited area.

He's the first person in the Bible whose life can be correlated with outside historic events.

And he's married to Sarah.

But there's a great sadness in their life.

They can't have children.

So God makes a promise to Abraham which we heard in our first reading –

That their descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

But before this can happen they have to go on a long journey,

Not just one journey, but several journeys.

Away from everything they know and love, from all safety and security,

A journey that will last many years.

And just when it looks like nothing will happen,

As if God has betrayed or forgotten them,

They have a son called Isaac.

It's a compelling human story,

A biblical soap opera,

Filled with drama, plot-twists and powerful emotion.

But the continuous thread that runs through the story of Abraham – and Sarah

– is about the nature of faith in God and trust in his promises.

Despite many wobbles,

It is Abraham's faith that motivates him forward

Sustains him on the journey

And guides him on the way.

While the Bible has Adam as our physical ancestor in the flesh.

Abraham is our spiritual ancestor in the faith.

## **ABRAHAM AND ISAAC**

But if you know one family story about Abraham,

You probably know the one where he nearly kills his son Isaac because he hears

God telling him to do so.

It's natural to be shocked by this story – that's part of the point of it – but I also want you to put that outrage to one side for a moment.

This isn't a story on which we are meant to base general ethical principles.

It's not that kind of story.

Instead, it's trying to say something about the nature of faith that most of us will recognise as authentic.

Sometimes, God seems to act – or asks us to act – in strange and incomprehensible ways.

And if those ways are strange to us, they appear even stranger to others.

The leap of faith is often a jump into absurdity, but it is also the transcendent adventure of God. This story of Abraham and Isaac speaks of the ineffable mystery of God who transgresses all rational criteria and pre-empted the words of Saint Paul who said that 'God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom'.

To the Church Fathers, this story spoke of the deepest nature of God as revealed in Christ.

In the total obedience and trust of Abraham, they saw a symbol of Jesus Christ. Just as Abraham willingly offered up to God what was most dear to him, So Christ freely offered up his life in love for us.

When the artist Chagall painted the sacrifice of Abraham – he painted in the background figure of Christ carrying his Cross. Second Adam and second Abraham.

### **THE MEANING IS IN THE WAITING**

I want you to imagine the conversation:

*'Er ... Sarah my dear'.*

*'Yes, Abraham my love'.*

*'I've just had a word from God'*

*'How nice for you'.*

*'God's told us to leave everything and ... go'.*

*'Go where dear?'*

*'Er ... well, I don't know yet, but God will tell us when we get there!'*

It has been pointed out that Abraham is told by God to 'go', while Jesus in the Gospels asks his disciples to 'follow'. But in Hebrew, 'Come' and 'Go' are one on the same word, depending on where you are standing.

So the call to Abraham is the same or similar call to radical faith and trust.  
It is the same call addressed to us,  
And the story of Abraham symbolises the human soul and its spiritual vocation in the world;  
Constantly searching,  
ever on pilgrimage,  
struggling to be faithful to God,  
in the midst of uncertainty and doubt.

And what I ask you to this is week is to read that story –  
Because it's your family history too.  
Chapters 11 to 25 of Genesis don't take long to get through.

And when you do, you'll see that the central feature of Abraham's faith is his waiting.  
He and Sarah waited an awfully long time between receiving the promises and the beginning of its fulfilment in the birth of Isaac – 26 years in fact!

And in that time they question God,  
They doubt his promises, his trustworthiness, his love  
And even his very existence.  
Here is something that rings true to our experience.  
It is hard for us to experience waiting as a gift.  
But we need this time as much as we need the delivery of the promise.  
It prepares our hearts and minds what we will be received.  
The waiting and the travelling and the uncertainty are as important as the reward itself.  
When the way ahead is most unclear, we should, in fact, keep going –  
As this is a sign that we are on the right path and God is alongside us.

### **LOOK UP AT THE STARS!**

So don't give up on the journey of faith.  
Yes it's hard.  
God knows it is.

It's often frightening and incomprehensible and lonely,  
But it's also worth it,  
Notice that to tell him more about the promises, it says that God 'brought him  
outside'.  
He takes Abraham out into the cold darkness of the night,  
And its while standing there that he says to him –  
'Look!'  
'Look up'  
'Look up at the stars'.  
And Abraham looks up to see a universe of light and wonder, greater than he  
can comprehend.  
And it is with that vision in his heart that Abraham, and you, and I journey ever  
onwards in faith towards the things that God has prepared for those who love  
him.

*With thanks to 'The Meaning is in the Waiting' by Paula Gooder.*