

Sermon

Eaglehawk Uniting Church

Rev Ralph Clarke

24th February 2013

Readings: Gen. 15:1-18; Luke 13:31-35

These readings tell us about threats faced by the people of God. For Abram, the threat is that God's promise that he will be the father of a great nation could not be fulfilled while he remains childless. Jesus is told to get out of town because King Herod is threatening to kill him, but it is not only Jesus life that is threatened. The greatest threat is the same as for Abram that the very purposes of God seem under threat if he dies.

God's promise to Abram came in a vision but it soon turns to a conversation as faith often does. Abram protests about having no child of his own. God responds with further promises – Abram's own son will be his heir and his heirs will eventually be as numerous as stars in the night sky. Abram believes, and his belief counted in God's eyes. But his name is yet to be changed from Abram, which means Exalted Father, to Abraham, which means Father of Multitudes.

God repeats a promise that Abram will be given land and again Abram protests – how am I to know that I will possess this land? In other words how can I bank on this being more than an empty promise? Or, can't you give me something more tangible than words and promises. We're used to politicians and even family members saying they will do things and then letting us down & Abram also likes actions more than words.

Again God responds to Abram – this time with a covenant ceremony. In our time, when two people promise loyalty to each other, they often seal that promise with a ritual of some sort, binding them to their promise and commitment. In business, an exchange of contracts may take place. Between friends there may be a mere handshake to seal a deal but that is often thought of as binding each other as much as any legal document. Children forming a gang may engage in some secret rituals that only they know. In marriage, a couple may exchange vows and rings and promise to love each other for life. The thing about covenants is – they call for some commitment from the covenant partners, and some trust that each of the covenant partners will keep their word.

In God's covenant with Abram, various animals are killed and divided and the meat is laid in rows. Abram has to protect the pieces of meat from the crows, perhaps a reminder that Abram & his descendents will need to protect the sign of God's covenant for successive generations. God tells Abram that on the way to possessing this land, he and his people will have some really tough times. They will be slaves, oppressed, struggle, and doubt the promise many times. Abram has to wait for the fulfilment of God's promises, and be ready for a long wait. The fulfilment is to be far from instant. All this is a summary of the biblical story for the next few centuries.

Abram still has doubts and questions. He was not perfect. His belief was a kind of readiness to see where this life might lead. A couple of chapters later we are told Abram's wife Sarah laughed at the promise of children because she was 90 something years old, but her laughter soon moved from the geriatric ward to the maternity ward when a son Isaac was born.

Abram and Sarah depict what faithfulness can be like for us, sometimes unsure and disbelieving, but prepared to venture on with God. The venturing with God doesn't erase the doubts and questions. Abram gathers up his doubts and stumbles along behind God into the future that despite Abram wanting more certainty, is still based only on God's promise. The story of the promise to Abraham raises for each of us a question: Is it possible to trust God even when the outcome looks doubtful? Life with God will often be like Abram's experience – a cycle of promise-resistance-reassurance and acceptance. Abram comes to accept that threats come and go in life, even as people of faith, and that part of the life of faith is to learn to deal with these threats. His faith helps him to believe that the threats, while scary, are not greater than God. Jesus also seems to reflect that truth as he moves to Jerusalem and the cross. The question is how can we reflect confidence that God is greater than the threats & fears we face?

Yet this story is not primarily about Abram, or us. It's about God's covenant being reliable. It helps us to sense that God's commitment is binding even when ours is weak, and that God's purpose is clear even when ours is wavering. This covenant is probably more like the bond between a mother and baby. A mother will usually care for her baby even when she's tired, and the baby will usually return some love to the mother and learn to trust her. But even if the baby doesn't love its mother, the mother will usually keep on loving the baby in some pretty heroic ways. God's love for us is like that. God keeps loving us, and helping us to love and trust him. God doesn't give up on us when we fail, or when our love, is not all it could be.