

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

The Intercession of Abraham

Proper 12 C July 25th 2019

Genesis 18:20-32 Luke 11:1-13

We all know stories about Robin Hood. They're very old folk tales, of course, but his name still has a hold in our culture – to the extent that, rather bizarrely, there's a Robin Hood Airport in Nottinghamshire, and exhibitions about him in the Sherwood Forest, not to mention numerous films, plays and books..

People find it interesting to ask if Robin Hood ever existed, or, to put it another way – who is this folk hero based on? When does he date from in history, and what actually happened? There are competing theories, of course, about these questions. But I think we all instinctively know that the most important *truth* about Robin Hood doesn't lie in who his 'original' was, or at what point in history he lived – but in the values his stories inculcate – the heroism of standing up for the underdog against unjust and despotic authority, the

nobility of working for redistribution of resources between the obscenely rich and the wretchedly poor, even if an outlaw's method of daylight robbery aren't necessarily to be encouraged!

The stories of early Genesis, too, are based on folk tales – extremely old ones; and like Robin Hood, they may have a basis in history, but it's hard to be sure where history ends, and legend begins. Trying to decipher this is a matter of absorbing interest to some people: but, like the tales of Robin Hood, there's a more important truth to be found in them than 'what actually happened – and exactly when?' They are *Scripture* for us not because in some ham-fisted way we can prove the existence of Abraham, (or of Noah and his Ark, or any of the rest of it). They are Scripture for us because, throughout the centuries, the people who came gradually to know and believe in one God found in him, and the stories about him, things they needed to know about relating to God, and God relating to us. Various writers, lost in the mists of history, probably first set down the stories found in the oral traditions of the Hebrews which were later amalgamated into the Book of Genesis; prophets and rabbis have drawn meaning out of them; and Jesus himself, as well as St Paul, refer to the figures in them,

Abraham and the stories about him, as ones which should shape our understanding of faith.

Today we heard the story of the Intercession Abraham. It follows on from last week's story of the hospitality of Abraham to three travelling strangers - the story which concluded with a promise of a son for Abraham's ageing wife, Sarah. Today's Old Testament reading moves forward a little way in that story – the young men, who were more than men – are leaving Abraham to journey down from the hill country into the great rift valley to the East, where the Dead Sea now lies, towards the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah. If you know the story, or remember it from last week, you'll remember that the way Genesis Chapter 18 tells the tale has been a bit confusing up to now: first we have been told that '*the Lord appeared to Abraham*'; (Gen 18.1) and then, immediately that it was three men that he entertained (Gen 18.2). The singular and the plural pronouns have more or less alternated throughout the tale – leading to sense of mystery about this manifestation. Now we have reached a point where we're told that the men '*turned and went towards Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the Lord*'. (Gen. 18.22). If you read on into the next chapter, you'll find that the men who have journeyed towards Sodom have turned into *two* angels,

suggesting rather neatly that all the previous mystery about the identity of who Abraham entertained is accounted for by the idea of the Lord appearing in human form, accompanied by two angels, whom he then sent ahead of him, in order to stay behind and have a personal *tete a tete* with Abraham. I think the person who finally brought Genesis together may have been at work here – tidying up and making sense of different strands of oral tradition and ironing out discrepancies.

But, be that as it may, the important thing is what happens in Abraham's interview with God as we heard it today. And extraordinarily, what the story depicts is a vigorous bit of middle eastern bargaining going on, with the Lord apparently a cheerful party, unoffended by Abraham's haggling with him. And, at the heart of this bargaining– as Abraham talks down the number of just people there would need to be in the wicked city of Sodom for the Lord to save it from destruction – are some even more extraordinary truths, which remain relevant to us today:

First, and most simply, that prayer may sometimes feel like arguing with God, or like pushing again and again at a door which doesn't open fully all at once. This is a similar point to the one Jesus made in the Gospel reading, when

he said (literally, according to the Greek text) '*Keep on asking..., keep on seeking..., keep on knocking...*' (Luke 11.9). Persistence in the same prayer is a sign of faith, not of faithlessness. Abraham is presented to us as daring, in his persistence – and he's proposed to us as the model of faith, even though what he's doing – trying apparently to change God's mind – seems like the most enormous cheek!

Secondly, let's look at the substance of Abraham's prayer, which was that God should *have mercy* – not on Abraham himself, not just on his nearest and dearest (though he did have a nephew Lot, in the city of Sodom), but on *all* the inhabitants of that city, whose very name was byword for injustice and evil. Abraham recognises in the Lord, alongside the holy claims of total righteousness, the equally holy nature of the merciful One. And, as a man of faith, he takes his stand on the side of God's mercy and love, and intercedes from that position – not just for his relatives, not just for the people he might regard as good, but for all the sinful people of an alien city whom he might fear and despise. May they all be saved, because of the good ones among them!

When we think of the history of religion, and the frequency with which believers have taken a stand for

vengeance, claiming that this was the outworking of God's justice against despised sinners or feared oppressors, Abraham's prayer is truly amazing. You only have to consider the name Sodom itself, and remember how often it has been spat out as a term of hatred, with a good deal of unholy relish at the idea of punishment coming to *other* people, to realise that human nature departs very easily from the kind of faith and intercession represented by Abraham in this story. We Christians, who remember our Lord's words on the cross, '*Father, forgive them, they know not what they do*' can be left in little doubt as we read about Abraham's haggling with God, about what the shape of our own praying should be when we look out upon a sinful and distressed world, however hostile it may sometimes seem to us.

In his bargaining, why does Abraham stop at the figure of ten just men as being sufficient to save the city? It isn't clear. But perhaps there's something suggestive in the fact that the (probably much later) Jewish tradition that ten is the number of men required to make what is called in Hebrew a *minyan* - a meeting for corporate prayer. Jewish tradition tells us that where a *minyan* meets the Divine Presence descends.

So, maybe there's a third point we can derive indirectly from this story then, about the effect of small, praying remnants, hidden within the heart of seemingly godless cultures. Jesus told his followers that such remnants are like yeast in the dough, or salt in the food; they - that is, we - can be a source of salvation for all around. And we can reflect, too, on the fact that in Christian tradition it seems that a *minyán* can be smaller even than ten: 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name,' says Jesus in Matthew 18.20, 'I am there among them'.

And this mention of Jesus' words brings us to the great Christian truth that in fact, in the matter of standing in the breach between sinners and their destruction, Jesus by himself is the sufficient One. Like Abraham, he makes intercession for us; but, going beyond Abraham, Christ is the holy one, the only truly just person, whose presence brings God's mercy. So, when we pray for the world, in our twos or our threes, our tens, twenties or thirties, it is effectual only because we pray in, with and through him.

You and I may feel ourselves a long way from nomadic tribesmen of the Bronze Age among whom the story of Abraham had its original context. Abraham himself is an individual whose historicity scholars may even debate. But as he appears to us as a figure in *Scripture*, he

certainly has relevant things to say, even to us in our post-Christian-culture, with all its confusion and decadence. Abraham represents for us a pattern of persistent intercessory prayer focused on mercy rather than hostility; his story tells us that the effect of a very small number who meet for prayer in the presence of the Lord, may be quite disproportionate; he suggests that our faithfulness to God may contribute to the salvation of people who seem very alien to us. By persisting in the Lord's way, and sticking together, in however small a group, we open the door to make God's mercy real in the world. Let's take this thought away today, even though there's so much more that could be said about this part of the Bible: what do the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah stand for?, for example: perhaps not quite what we've been led to believe. I'd love to explore that with you another time.

But for now, let's just stick with the idea of opening what Pope Francis has called 'the gate of mercy', and our significant role in that as people who intercede.