

In the story in Genesis today we have a story that is huge for the people of Israel. It is this story that sets in motion the whole basis of the chosen people of Israel. This is the covenant with Abraham 4000 years ago. God tells the 99 year old man who had not been able to have a child with his wife Sarah that they would become pregnant. Not only that but they would be very fruitful, ancestors of a multitude of nations. God also promised land – this plays an enormous role for the people of Israel. However, today we concentrate on the fertility issue. Sarah has been unable to conceive, is considered long barren. She even goes as far as to offer her slave girl to Abram so there will be an heir, albeit one born to a slave girl.

Having been an OB/Gyn for 12 years and worked with many couples in infertility I know this can be a very delicate and difficult issue. It can be fraught with disappointment, and emotional roller coasters. Yet in this case Abraham not only listens to God but falls down on his face with fear and respect. He could well have been very skeptical and incredulous. This would have been a natural reaction to news that didn't seem to match he and Sarah's experience of other elderly barren couples they might have known.

But he believed the Lord and the Lord reckoned to him as righteousness or faithfulness. Paul picks this up in his letter to the Roman church. Paul tells us – the promises didn't come from God through the covenantal law but through this righteousness of faith. There was no distrust that made Abraham waver concerning the promises of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God. He was fully convinced that God was able to do what he promised, even though this went against the norms of nature as Abraham and Sarah experienced them.

Do we believe that God can rescue us from desperate or impossible situations? Where is our faithfulness? Is our faith like that of Abraham, steadfast and solid or do we doubt God can turn our own calamities into stories of success. Do we believe that God can and will turn our problems in this modern world into victories for us and Him?

In his writings Paul strongly tells us it is faith and righteousness that leads to Abraham's and Sarah's becoming parents of many great nations, blessed by God. He notes that the covenant of giving land and ancestors in return for circumcision as a mark of that covenant came after the story of Abraham's faithfulness and righteousness. They didn't reap a reward after years of service, no the covenant was because of his faithfulness and love. Paul reasons that it is not this following of the law that God truly desires but faith in Him and his son Jesus Christ. The

readings of the prophets are full of prophecies about God not wanting sacrifices and fasting but steadfast belief in him alone.

We too may follow our religious laws, customs and practices but it is our faith and love of Christ that God truly desires of us. All these practices that we participate in are to help us to find God and meet him here in this place. They are not however a substitute for true faith and commitment to God.

This is further expounded in today's Gospel. Jesus foretells of his death and resurrection. Peter was Jesus' most senior apostle, the first called. Peter had followed Jesus, listened to him, stayed with him, talked and questioned him. Yet he didn't understand Jesus' true purpose. Not having true understanding he would naturally have tried to stop this horrible death of his teacher, companion and friend. Most of us would likely do the same. It is natural for us to have our family and friends avoid pain in this world. But sometimes it is more important to support our family and friends in their difficult and possibly dangerous tasks than to get them to avoid any pain. We know that the Lord will help us through the times of trials and tribulations. As we may be called to walk in the shadow of darkness we need fear no evil if we walk with God by our side.

After rebuking Peter, Jesus tells the crowd to deny themselves, in other words avoid giving into natural temptations. We should attempt to be blameless. This is what God asked of Abraham and he asks this of us today. He goes on to say we should take up our cross and follow him. It doesn't specify what each of our crosses will be just that when we feel and hear God's call we must go. God had instructed Abraham to walk before him. This seems to be in the same vein as Jesus instructing the crowds to take up their crosses and follow Christ.

So we must open our hearts continuously to hear God's call to each and every one of us, each and every day. We must ask, "today what can I do to follow the example of Christ in service of the people of God".

It is a great paradox that the gospel proclaims – those who desperately try to save or control their own lives, run their own show, will lose their lives. It is in surrendering our life to the service of God and the care of his people that we find life and peace.

Our reward for our service to God may not be directly apparent or be worldly rewards and riches. In my case I truly pray that unlike Abraham I hope the Lord doesn't bless my wife Mary and I with children when I'm 99! She'll be 100! Please God, NO! Grandchildren plentiful and abundant would be great.

I believe that what we will receive is what Aristotle calls eudymonia. This means happiness and success, but not in terms that are familiar in today's world. It doesn't mean superficial joy and

giddy happiness. Nor does it mean financial success or popularity or prestige. What eudymonia really means is a deep peace and well being, Serenity. Peace deep in our souls, Communing with the Lord our God and God's son Jesus Christ. Knowing in our hearts that we are serving God to the best of our abilities. That despite all our weaknesses and failures we continue to try to live and serve the Lord in our daily life.

May we be like Abraham and try to live blamelessly and walk before our God with Faith and righteousness.