

SERMON: 5 July 2020 – Rev Alistair Cowper

" God's Idea of Homeland and Family "

(Genesis 24)

After the birth of Isaac

Sarah dies aged 127, so Abraham 137, Ishmael 51 and Isaac 37

Abraham - "a stranger in a foreign land" (23:4).

The Hittites ruled the land where Abraham lived.

They considered Abraham "an honoured prince among" them and they even let him choose the finest tomb in their land.

You can see then that someone was looking after Abraham.

The God who'd promised him a homeland and as many descendants as the sand on the seashore.

Yet he felt like a stranger in a foreign land.

Sometimes it can feel like we are in a foreign land.

Maybe at the moment it does.

The pandemic has changed life for all of us and it feels like were living in a strange world.

But God has promised us a homeland.

I will prepare a place for you.

I am with you always.

I call you my friends.

Words that God has spoken to us through Jesus.

Words that we do well to remember when times are strange.

In a sense, Christ makes us like honoured princes in a foreign land.

But back to Abraham.

So Abraham, the honoured prince in a foreign land, buys a plot from Ephron near Mamre (modern day Hebron).

He could've even had it free of charge but insisted on paying for it, legally and publicly; and even though God had promised it to him.

Today, Hebron is a heavily guarded, militarised, disputed territory and its important to Jews, Muslims and Christians.

Its a bit ironic that today, the State of Israel don't share Abraham's insistence about obtaining a plot of land legally.

Instead they do what Abraham didn't do and insist that the territories they illegally occupy are God given, even if that means throwing poor Palestinian people off the lands they've lived on for generations.

It must be possible for Israelies and Palestinians to live side by side peacefully and thankfully there are people of peace working for that very thing to happen.

Isaac may have been 37 years old but the Genesis story says that it was Abraham that makes a move to find Isaac a wife.

It was important to Abraham that a wife come from his original homeland, his own tribe if you like. He didn't want Isaac to have a foreign wife, like Ishmael had.

That's a very human concern.

Some might see it as the right thing to have done. Others might have argued that it didn't really matter. Certainly the idea of marrying outside the tribe became more of a law later on.

I remember in my own experience thinking that if I ever married I'd want to marry someone who at least shared my own idea of faith.

It was important to me that God at least had a hand in bringing my wife and I together, and I believe that did indeed happen.

I'm perhaps just glad that I didn't have to depend on my parents to arrange it!

But maybe that was to doubt that God could make anything happen even in a relationship where one partner believes and the other doesn't.

But back to Abraham.

It was important to Abraham that Isaac marry from the tribe.

So he calls his servant and sends him on his way.

The servant says what if I can't find anyone suitable, will I take Isaac with me?

Abraham is appalled at the idea that he might lose Isaac in that way. He doesn't want to lose him.

And in that moment I think he's showing us something about how God feels about us, his own children.

He doesn't want to lose them, not one, but he's prepared to give up his own to save us.

I love how the servant sets off and arrives at the village where Abraham's family live and he goes to the well, the place where the women would gather for water in the evening and he prays,

"O Lord, God of my master. Give me success and show kindness to my master, Abraham, Help me to accomplish the purpose of my journey" (24:12). What a great prayer - short and to the point. He's not afraid to ask. And God it seems is not afraid to answer.

He even lays out the specifics of how he will know when the mission is accomplished - he'll ask one of the women for a drink, just like Jesus would do centuries later, and if she offered to water the camels as well then she would be the one!

Lo and behold, it turns out to be Rebekah, grand daughter of Abraham's brother.

And the servant gives her the gold nose ring and bracelets.

The smell of the gold doesn't bypass Rebekah's brother, Laban.

He notices it and we can tell Laban is going to be trouble.

Maybe not for Isaac but certainly for Jacob, years later.

Families eh?

Here's Nessie reading from verse 34-38, 42-49

Laban tries to delay Rebekah's departure. I told you he would be trouble.

But then sees reason and thankfully asks Rebekah what she thinks of it all rather than deciding for her.

58-67

Themes to pray about:

Homeland - honour in a foreign land

Tribe - continuation of family

Prayer - servant

Faithful duty - Rebekah

Hebrews 11

9 By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. **10** For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

The writer of Hebrews commends a whole list of people for their faith.

yet none of them received what had been promised, **40** since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

God's idea of family is so much more inclusive and expansive than any human idea.

It's not limited to any one biological grouping or tribe.

It's so much bigger.

And even in their present dysfunction state, God loves the idea of family and is working to bring about that homeland with eternal foundations where all people can live together safely side by side.

That's a vision worth hoping and praying for, and working towards as we seek to build the kind of kingdom that Jesus modelled and hoped for.

God is indeed working things out and bringing all things together, and making all things well.