

## **SERMON: Sunday – 9 July 2023 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

### **Generosity, Hospitality and Decision-Making**

Genesis 24:10-21

Acts 21:7-15

I read this week that a local minister each Sunday, before she leads worship or preaches, has the habit of repeating to herself the first line of the hymn by Frances Ridley Havergal, 'Lord speak to me, that I may speak.'

She goes on to say that she never knows whether it is a prayer or a cry. Whatever it is, it is clearly something that she longs for, that God would help and guide her towards God's message rather than her own.

Presumably, this is the desire of all those who worship God; to hear what it is that God wants us to do and say.

The questions - Where is God? What does God want? How can I speak to God? How can I hear God? - are all questions that Christians ask and ask regularly.

A central part of our faith is the belief that God is in a constant relationship with us, is always trying to draw close to us, and draw us close to God. Yet, it is also true that for many people of faith, it is difficult to see, feel, hear, or sense God in our everyday lives.

We have become accustomed to certainty, to scientific discovery and provability. That is the world in which we live - a world that says unless we can prove it, it remains untrue.

Despite this, for those who believe, at the centre of our lives is the chasm of faith. The trust that God is there, that Jesus lived, died, and rose again, and that the Holy Spirit remains with us. These things are not provable, and yet we believe.

It is little wonder that we ask our questions. It is no surprise that deep down most of us would like our faith to be verified. We long for God's voice speaking into our lives, clearly and unambiguously.

Partly this is the reason the stories of the Book of Genesis seem so far removed from our modern experience. On top of the fantastical tales, God seems to be constantly speaking to people.

Faith might not be so difficult if God was popping up every now and again to have a conversation with us.

I think that the story of Rebekah might offer us some help.

This is a story of people interacting with God, speaking to God, hearing from God, and following God's will. Abraham has sent his servant to find a wife for his son Isaac. The servant then prays to God that this woman will be made known to him at the well. This is where Rebekah comes in. It is supposed to be obvious, through her behaviour, that she is the one God is calling to marry Isaac.

In this story, while God does interact with some of the characters directly, Rebekah is not one of them, and yet it is clear that God is acting, speaking, and working through her.

Abraham's servant is given two basic instructions. Don't select a wife for Isaac from the local population of Canaan. And don't take Isaac away to a foreign land to look for a wife. Abraham wanted a wife for Isaac who would share the faith of his ancestors, the God of his own mother and father, and grandparents, the God he'd known, who spoke to him in the past and who'd led him to be where he was today, an old man living under the Promise, a man called to live by faith in what was as yet unproven and unseen.

Here's a wee poem based on the Rebekah story:

At the well he prayed for success  
A kindness for his ageing master  
A simple drink would seal the deal  
Rebekah, obedient, was the answer

Rebekah was the answer to the servant's prayer. There's no doubt that God is present through her words and generous and hospitable actions.

Some might put it down to a blessed coincidence, that Rebekah just happened to be there at the right time, and from the only family in the region that just so happened to be related to Abraham.

But coincidences seems to happen more often when people pray. And answered prayer is full of God-incidences.

The events in Genesis were encircled by prayer for success. So surely, God was bringing together Rebekah and Isaac. It would be a marriage made in heaven.

We might take from this the importance of choosing one's life partner, or perhaps more generally, the importance of involving the God we've known in every decision we make.

We are called to live by faith and not by sight, to trust that the God who was before us will still be there for us and show us the way.

God is generous, hospitable, gracious.

God provides for those who look to God to provide.

God shows hospitality to those who look to God for hospitality.

God is gracious that when we make a bad choice or take a wrong turn, God will not abandon those who know God to be gracious.

There is clear evidence in the search for Rebekah that God is at work in all the parties involved. The Holy Spirit is the Big Life happening within Abraham, his servant and Rebekah; the flow of divine energy who feels like love beating in the heart.

That same Big Life is what Jesus revealed to be what it means to be living by faith as the absolute example of a life lived in love. And to be in Christ, which we are by faith, is to live that same life.

As well as teaching us more on living by faith, today's New Testament reading show us that love and suffering go hand in hand.

For the Apostle Paul, living this Big Life of Christ living in him meant that he was willing to die for the cause of sharing the good news.

The disciples at Tyre, along with his fellow travellers including Luke, felt urged by the Holy Spirit to say they didn't want Paul to go to Jerusalem because they knew that wasn't going to go well. They tried to persuade him not to go. Yet Paul goes. He too believes he's being led by the same Holy Spirit, the Big Life living in him.

On the one hand the Spirit seems to be saying don't go. And on the other Paul feels compelled to go none the less.

22 "And now I am bound by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. I don't know what awaits me, 23 except that the Holy Spirit tells me in city after city that jail and suffering lie ahead. 24 But my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus—the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.

He's absolutely convinced of the leading of God in this.

It's not that his fellow travellers or the disciples at Tyre necessarily misheard God. What matters most was that in the end the disciples were able to come to a consensus around God's will being uppermost.

(SLIDE)

When it was clear that we couldn't persuade him, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done."

Acts 21:14

When we're not sure which is the right way, we must settle on the simple prayer, thy will be done.

We might not face death for our faith but we will be challenged to involve God in all our decisions big or small and to be prepared to say at the end of the day, may the will of God prevail, because God is loving, generous and hospitable.

What does it really mean for God to speak into the world and where it is that we might find God speaking today?

Where are the places of hospitality where we might lay the table and allow God to feed those who come to it?

The Hub is an obvious answer. But there will be other places and times of encounter where we can exercise hospitality. Surely every time we meet as church, or in the name of Jesus, there is the expectation of God's presence, because if God is with us then God is with us.

Encountering God often comes in our relationships with other people. God doesn't simply do something Gods-self but relies on the relationships people create between each other.

So may we treasure every relationship this week and may we expect God to be present in them as we take it to the Lord in prayer.

And God of all, may your will be done and your kingdom come,  
In Kirknewton and East Calder  
And in all the world.  
Amen.