

## **SERMON: 24 July 2016 – Rev Ian Walker**

**Readings: Old Test: Genesis 18: 20 – 33**

**Gospel: Luke 11: 1 – 10**

A couple of weeks ago, I was conducting worship in Broxburn and I started off in this way:

“Where do we start? What message of hope or comfort or even understanding can we offer at a time like this?”

The main British political parties are in total disarray, and seem unable to offer any positive note in the shambles left behind after the referendum. That confusion and lack of forward planning is reflected in the Chilcot Report into the Iraq war.

We are left asking questions. Who can we trust? Where do we go from here? Who will provide any kind of leadership?”

It seems as if things are only getting worse! A lorry used as a tool of mass murder in Nice, an attempted coup in Turkey, a devastating gun attack in Munich.

What message of hope or comfort or even understanding can we offer at a time like this?

I believe that the themes running through the lectionary passages set for today point us in the right direction.

Genesis, as its title and opening sentence suggest, is about the beginning of all things. As it continues it develops its most important theme: the beginnings of God’s relationship with Abraham as the precursor of the ‘People of God’.

In today’s lesson we see Abraham talking to God and taking the liberty of questioning God’s judgement. Instead of getting angry, God responds and as the conversation goes on, we begin to realize that this is a story about Abraham’s growing understanding of this God in whom he has put his trust.

In Luke’s Gospel the disciples are also on a learning curve. They ask what seems like a straightforward question about prayer and finish up having to wrestle with a story about an annoying householder and a grumpy neighbour.

The most obvious theme in our passages is persistence.

Abraham comes back to God time and again to ask yet another question, he's terribly polite but terribly persistent.

In the Gospel, Jesus commends the householder for his persistence and says that we need to have that kind of persistence in prayer.

Don't give up, no matter how difficult or depressing things look; in our world, in our nation; in our lives. Keep on speaking to God, keep on asking him questions, keep on challenging him for answers. Be as persistent as Abraham and the householder.

A little time ago one of our grandchildren got a new game of Monopoly and was very persistent that we played with it. She thought it was very funny when almost straight away I landed on the square with the legend 'Go directly to jail – do not pass GO – do not collect £200.

That pointed me to another theme that links our readings – Go directly to God – don't be distracted; don't turn aside for anything; don't be waylaid by facile answers.

Abraham had the courage to go straight to God and question him.

Even though it was late, the householder went straight to his neighbour with his request.

But perhaps the most important theme that links our readings; the one that gives us the confidence to go straight to God is the theme of fatherhood - Abraham is to become the father of a mighty people and the prayer which Jesus teaches his disciples starts by addressing God as father – Our Father.

But that story from the Book of Genesis, so vividly read for us by Brenda, is not just about Abraham questioning God.

Just prior to the point where our reading started, we are told that God has decided that the time has come to let Abraham into his plan for the future.

Experts in education tell us that we remember very little of what we hear, a bit more of what we read, but the best way to learn is by finding out for ourselves. So God doesn't simply tell Abraham the plan he lets him discover it, bit by bit, for himself. God encourages him to question and to think about matters of justice, life and death.

So Abraham's persistence is about finding things out about God and about God's purposes for his creation.

The same kind of learning is going on in Luke's Gospel. The passage starts with Jesus at prayer.

It's not the first time that the disciples have had to wait while Jesus went to some quiet place to pray and, by now, they have discovered that prayer is central to his life. So they ask him 'Teach us to pray.'

Jesus provides a model for prayer, but then goes on to tell them a funny story about a really irritating neighbour.

As they struggle to understand the story they, like Abraham before them, are learning about the nature of God.

So, persistence is about finding out more and more about God and we are still called to ask questions, so that we go on learning about him, in order that we do not lose hope, but understand more and more about his purposes for us and for his world, however daunting the situation seems.

The disciples wanted a prayer that they could repeat, a bit of special knowledge that would identify them as followers of Jesus.

Jesus gave them a model prayer; one that still serves us today.

But he went on to tell them that they can't rely on formal prayers, on some kind of mantra to be repeated.

Just be yourselves, he says to them, let God see and hear all about you; involve him in every part of your life.

That message is for us as well!

We are invited to share our lives with God; talking to him directly; seeking to know his will and nature just as Abraham did; asking for what we need, just as the pestering neighbour asked his friend, but above all by trusting him and letting nothing come between us and him.

So both Abraham and Jesus say 'Go directly to God; don't let any substitutes get in the way'.

Abraham is to become the father of a great and mighty nation even though, in his personal and family life, he was not the best ever example of fatherhood!

One author has described him like this:

'Abraham came to fatherhood late in life, when he fathered a son by his servant girl and then, when his real wife, Sarah, becomes pregnant, kicks them both out; then he drags his family around the Middle East with no fixed abode and finally he goes up a mountain ready to sacrifice his son to God. Social Services would have had a lot of case meetings about father Abraham!'

So if Abraham is going to be father of the nation, he needs a lot of instruction about how the mighty are to treat the weak and that is really what God is encouraging Abraham to do with his repeated questions.

God is almost teasing him out of the straightjacket that 'religion' can so often become, so that Abraham can discover the kind of faith that is ready to change its preconceptions as it understands more and about God.

The disciples ask for a prayer and Jesus says pray like this  
'Our Father'.

Judaism had and still has a great respect for the idea of God as Father. They had a special word for God the father - ABINU.

Jesus would have been well aware of that but it was not the word he used. Instead he taught his friends to use a simple word, the one that a child would use of a loved and loving Father – Abba – daddy: a word lacking dignity or power. Jesus asks them to think outside the box of conventional faith so that they understand new things about God.

But Jesus also makes it clear that this Abba is not a sentimental doting father who coughs up whatever we ask for.

The Lord's Prayer is not a shopping list of things that we want; on the contrary it establishes the kind of relationship which a child ideally has with his or her father.

As children of our heavenly father we are part of his kingdom which encompasses both heaven and earth, the present reality, however confused and confusing, as well as the future filled with hope and security.

Armed with that confidence we are sure that our father will provide us with bread and not stones, that he will forgive our foolishness if we, in turn, try to show the same kind of love and forgiveness to others that he has shown to us

Both passages remind us that approaching God is easier than we think because God is not a remote deity but a father who is interested in all that we are and do.

So be persistent.

Go directly to God for he is ready to answer when we ask; ready to open the door when we knock; ready to provide what we need.

Jesus invites us to speak to God simply, as a child speaks to his father; sharing our joys and our fears with him.

If we believe that an earthly father, with all his imperfections, will provide for his children how much more can we trust our Heavenly Father to provide for us now and in the future.

Amen