

**Winchester, Eastleigh & Romsey Circuit
Service at Home Sheet 13th October 2024
Bible Month 2: Learning from Abraham**

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Preparation

Take time to settle yourself comfortably, with both feet firmly on the floor, and relax. Take a few steady slow deep breaths, and focus on your breathing, to help clear your mind, then use this prayer.

Gracious God,
As I breathe out, help me to let go of stress or bitterness, health worries or doubt, anxiety or sadness, envy or depression; anything that gets in the way of awareness of Your Presence.

Wait with me as I breathe in your gifts:
Acceptance and love, joy and trust,
courage and hope, forgiveness and calm.
However I am feeling, even when life is tough or I have made mistakes
help me to know that I am your beloved child. Amen.

Adapted from URC prayer handbook 2024

Introduction

During October three of the four preachers preparing service at home sheets are leading Bible month services at Wesley Weeke. Some other churches used this material from Methodist Connexion during the summer, so we thought you might like to share in this, knowing that many Methodists throughout the country have been following it over the last few months. This year the series takes themes from Genesis, and I have been asked to prepare a service around a story about Abraham that I know many people find difficult., because at first sight it seems so different from Jesus' teaching. So let's begin by reminding ourselves of Jesus central message about God's love

Hymn 3 <https://youtu.be/inaETa6Cn5o>

Eternal God , your loves tremendous glory
Cascades through life in overflowing grace,
to tell creation's meaning in the story
Of love enfolding love in time and space.

Eternal Son of God, uniquely precious,
In you deserted, scorned and crucified,
God's love has fathomed sin and death's
deep darkness,
and flawed humanity is glorified.

Eternal Spirit, with us like a mother,
embracing us in love serene and pure,
You nurture strength to follow Christ our
brother,
as full grown children, confident and sure.

Love's trinity self-perfect self-sustaining,
love which commands enables and obeys:
you give yourself in boundless joy creating
one vast increasing harmony of praise.

We ask you now complete your image in us,
this love of yours our source and guide and
goal

May love in us seek love and serve love's
purpose

Till we arise with Christ and find love whole.
Alan Gaunt born 1935

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Generous God,
Thank you for giving us voices.
Some melodious, some croaky,
some loud and some soft.
Thank you for my voice.

You gave us words and music,
gifts of great potential,
to wound or to wonder,
to bore or inspire,
to bless or harm.
Thank you for the books and music
I enjoy.

And in your church
you have gathered
a community of ordinary people,
Some able to meet together,
some at home.

Noisy people, quiet people
cheerful people , shy people ,
practical doers and quiet thinkers ,
You have made a place for each one of us.

Thank you that I am part of a church community.
So as I worship help me to be real and honest in my thinking, so I can take something of your love into the week ahead,
Amen

adapted from Iona Wee Worship Book

Bible Story

So we come to the Bible story set for today, a story from pre-history passed down by word of mouth over centuries, a story from a time when life was very different, and people's understanding of God was very different. A story that has been held sacred by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike, but a story that in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries can be deeply troubling,, more of a stumbling block than a stepping stone.

Abraham had been called by God to leave his settled city life and embark on a journey to a new land, promised it would belong to his descendants for centuries. The problem was he and Sarah had no child to inherit. Eventually, after many adventures, Sarah gave birth to Isaac, their only child. Isaac is a growing lad when we take up the story.

Read Genesis 22 1-14

Some readers react with wonder, seeing this as demonstrating God's mercy and positive response to Abraham's faithfulness. Others recoil in horror - could God really be so cruel to Isaac? There are two very different ways of interpreting this story, and I will share both, leaving you to make up your own mind about its importance for you

The traditional view

In this story God tests Abraham's commitment and trust in the most extreme way. God has promised that Abraham's descendants will inherit the land and become a great nation, but that depends on Isaac's survival. When God seems to demand something that puts everything God has promised in jeopardy, Abraham

obeys, against all the instincts of a loving parent, trusting God for the outcome. Only at the last moment, when Abraham has been about to kill his son does God intervene providing a sheep for sacrifice. What an example of total trust in God!

The stumbling block:

As Christians we are encouraged to interpret the Old Testament in the light of Jesus teaching.

Jesus who said let the little children come to me, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these. And If anyone causes one of these little ones to stumble it would be better for him to have a millstone tied round his neck and be thrown into the sea. Here is Jesus teaching about children, revolutionary at the time, widely accepted as an ideal to aim for now .

As a mother and grandmother, as a teacher, Do I really believe that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ would call Abraham to do something so dreadful, to put his precious child through such a terrible traumatic experience? Even though there was reprieve, what did that experience do to Isaac?

Because of family circumstances, I have had to learn a great deal about the impact of early childhood trauma on mental health, so I can understand it's a story that puts some people off believing in God

An alternative way forward

One of the first lessons in sermon preparation in training as a local preacher, is always ask first what did this Bible passage say to people at the time? And then how do we apply the basic principle underlying that to our very different situation, in the light of Jesus' teaching?.

My Aunt, had a favourite hymn which is not in our book. :The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his word.

And there is more light and truth to be found here, if we look at it differently, in the light both of Jesus' teaching and with the knowledge of the time provided by anthropology

In ancient traditions, in many cultures, human sacrifice was thought to be what the gods required, and such ritual killings were practised by tribes at the time and in the area where Abraham lived

So could it be, Abraham thinks, I believe in a god who is far greater than theirs, I must honour him as generously as they honour theirs.– what is the greatest sacrifice I can make?– my son. This must be what is required of me.

Was it not so much God telling Abraham to do it, but Abraham getting it horribly wrong? Trying to outdo his neighbours in devotion, did Abraham get the wrong end of the stick?.

So he set out to do the dreadful deed – but God eventually gets through to him - says STOP. Isaac is my gift to you, my promise for the future. Don't harm him. I do not want human blood. Stop being so melodramatic, Here is an ordinary sheep use that instead, that will be perfectly adequate. .

So perhaps the original purpose was to teach firmly that human sacrifice was wrong – human life is precious in the eyes of God. Could this be its message to the original hearers? And so animal sacrifice became central to ancient Jewish worship. It's not a relevant issue for us, but the underlying question is timeless.

We too ask the question what does God require. It's a central question in all religions. What is it God require of us? We will explore that after the hymn

If you have found this difficult, use the next hymn as a prayer. If you are in a secure

place, use the hymn as a prayer for someone who is wrestling with doubt.

Hymn 629 <https://youtu.be/BNJr-hC7r4o>

God of my faith, I offer you my doubt,
for life at times seems far too dark for me,
and my belief becomes more insecure
when worldly cares produce uncertainty.

God of my hope I offer you my fear,
when I am scared by my anxiety,
when all I hear is suffering and woe,
in all my shadows you will walk with me.

God of my joy I offer you my grief,
when I sink down in sadness or despair,
when in depression I cannot be touched,
I pray in all my depths to find you there.

God of my love, I offer you my pain,
when I'm alone and feel nobody cares,
in aching age or in rejected youth
you bear my cross and dry my human tears.

God of my life, I offer you my dreams,
light in the darkness, where I hide from view,
light in my faith, my hope, my joy, my love.
Light in my life and all my life in you.

Colin Ferguson born 1937

Readings: Micah 6:6-8. Romans 12:1-2

Reflection

This is a much loved passage from Micah, somewhat different in different translations. That's because the words translated as justice and mercy in the Authorised Version, are "umbrella words" in Hebrew, covering more than any single word in English can totally capture.

We tend to think of justice as being about good laws, and fair judgement in the lawcourts, about treating people fairly. That is included here, but it also means playing your proper part, in your family and your community, living responsibly.

The word sometimes translated "mercy" sometimes "kindness", sometimes

“steadfast love” includes all of those: the qualities we see fully in Jesus.

In Romans 12, Paul expands on what it means to walk humbly with God, to “present your life as a living sacrifice” .

But in the end we each have to work out for ourselves how to do this in our particular circumstances. We know we don’t live up to our best intentions, that we find some choices very difficult, that we often get it wrong. So now we pray for forgiveness and help for the week ahead, and then bring our concern for others to God.

Prayer of confession,

Loving God,
You know each of us through and through,
You know how difficult we find it to walk humbly with you.
Help me to be honest before you, as I recall the wrong things I have done or said, and the good things I have left undone or unsaid.....

As I recall the words of Jesus to those who want to walk his way: Your sins are forgiven, now follow me, help me to learn from my mistakes, and grow in wisdom.

Thank you, for your mercy is as deep and full as I need. Amen

Prayer for others

Gracious God, Abraham’s story has brought difficult issues to mind. We think of children traumatised through many different circumstances: cruelty, neglect, war and hunger.

We pray for adoptive and foster parents caring for children whose have suffered and whose behaviour can be challenging.

We pray for parents who cannot meet their children’s most basic needs, and we think especially of the people driven from their homes by war in Gaza and Lebanon.

We think of people making difficult decisions

In quiet bring before God people you know in particular need at this time.....

May we and they know the assurance of Gods loving presence in the week ahead.
Amen

The Lord’s Prayer

Hymn 416 <https://youtu.be/kamADrIPEDs>

Theres a wideness in God’s mercy
like the wideness of the sea ,
there’s a kindness in his justice
which is more than liberty.

There is plentiful redemption
in the blood that has been shed,
there is joy for all the members,
in the sorrows of the head.

There is grace enough for thousands
of new worlds as great as this,
there is room for fresh creations
in that upper home of bliss.

For the love of God is broader
than the measures of the mind;
and the heart of the eternal
is most wonderfully kind.

But we make his love too narrow
by false limits of our own
and we magnify his strictness
with a zeal he will not own.

If our love were but more simple
we should take him at his word
and our lives would be illumined by the
presence of our Lord.

Frederick William Faber 1824-1863

Blessing

Hold people you care about in mind as you say the grace;

The grace of Our lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore, Amen

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