

19 September 2010
Sunday 25C

Sermon notes:

Galatians 3.1-7

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Many of you have long known the remarkable things I am only now learning about little people – toddlers – most of which things I never even imagined that I didn't know, or would now be learning. One thing which has struck me lately is how it is becoming increasingly possible to conduct a conversation with what was once quite incapable of such intercourse! That this would have happened eventually I might have worked out had I ever actually thought about it. But the thing which has amazed me most is the reliability of the testimony of an almost-three year old. It is usually the case that, if he states that something is so, or happened, or is going to happen, that it is most likely to be true. It's not that I ever imagined that he would be born a liar, but simply that I never really thought he could be so *reliable* in his account of the world – particularly at this age. It is not that he is *totally* without guile. Testimony as to the contents of his nappy is rather less reliable, particularly if he's involved in something fun. And there are those things he has just not understood and simply re-interpreted in a way which makes sense to him, and those times are usually obvious enough. But for the most part if he says that it is so, you can believe him.

In our text from Galatians this morning, Paul is drawing on the account of God's promises to Abraham to make a similar point about God and about Abraham: "Abraham believed God, and God counted that as righteousness". I want to focus this morning on the "believing God" part of that text; we might come back to the "reckoning as righteousness" in a week or two.

The first important thing to see here is that what the text does *not* say is, "Abraham believed *in* God..." What is at stake here is not what we usually mean by "believing in God" – that Abraham believed that God *existed*. For Abraham it was obvious that God – or the gods – existed. The important thing was not the existence of these gods, but the question of whether or not they *speak*, and then whether what they say can be trusted.

(As an aside, in the original Hebrew which sits behind the Greek which Paul quotes [Genesis 15.6], it in fact reads not "Abraham believed God" but "Abraham believed the LORD [Yahweh], and the LORD [Yahweh] reckoned it as righteousness.

The significance of this is that the original text refines the point for us: it is not merely "God" or "a god" who/which Abraham believes, it is *this particular* God, the one whose name is Yahweh.)

This is rather a difficult thing to prove or disprove. But one way forward is to ask about the kind of things we usually hear which invite us to *believe* or trust the one who addresses us. We have recently been through one intense period of invitation to trust, such as comes our way every couple of years. Our politicians speak to us, and invite us to believe. Whether rightly or wrongly, there is a significant diminishing of confidence here that people can believe what they are told, or trust those who tell them. Why this is the case has to do with the nature of our political system itself, but this is not much recognised and so makes little difference to levels of cynicism in the electorate.

Weddings are another place where people make promises which the one being addressed is invited to believe, trusting that the promise maker will be true. Again, the reasons for the failures of so much such promise making are many and complex but, whatever the reason for the failures, we encounter here a crisis of believability – we know that the promises can finally be left unfulfilled. Even the lover's promise – "I will love you forever" – runs aground on our very mortality, if we do manage a life of faithfulness to the one to whom we addressed our promise.

Parents implicitly make promises to their children in the very bearing of a child; but we are all well enough aware of the kinds of failures to fulfil the promises which are made here. On a different level, our money is a kind of promise – the sign of a system of trust which seeks to guarantee a reliable value of exchange for a given amount of money. And yet – if we haven't all felt its effects particularly sharply for a long time – whatever it is which purports to guarantee the promise our money makes is not particularly reliable. At the very least, leave your money in a drawer and it will not be that long before it diminishes in value to a fraction of what it once was.

When we ask about whether God speaks, and about whether God says anything reliable, the first question is not whether this makes any sense or is itself believable. We must recognise first that promise making and promise keeping is an uncertain business even in the mundane world. The kind of promise a God might make, and its believability, has to be considered against the backdrop of promise-making in the wider world. The important point for the story of Abraham is that here a promise is made, and believed. The question which then needs to be

addressed is not whether the promise-maker "exists" but the nature of that promise.

Abraham and Sarah had nothing going for them. They were old, childless, and a very small minority in the land which was promised to them. The Old Testament can be read at one level as a series of failures to trust the promise of God because other things seemed *more* promising. The unbelievability of the promise of God is shown in the shenanigans the people get up to – such as Abraham's having a child by his wife's handmaid to ensure that he has an heir. And yet the story continually has the promise unfolding against all such seemingly insurmountable odds.

But in addition to the the promise being continually re-stated, we should also note a fundamental difference between the promise of God and those other things which seemed more promising. The promise of things in the world around us is almost without exception conditional: do this, and the reward will follow; invest in this fund rather than that one and *then* your future will be secure; *if* you vote for me, *then* this will be your reward; if you are good, then I will love you. These apparent promises are not actually promises at all, but secret rules and formulas which we can apply to each other and to the world around us to get what it is we desire. They involve an *exchange*; if you give this, then you get that.

Over against this is not simply *that* God also makes a promise to Abraham, but its character as a *genuine* gift-promise. The realisation or fulfilment of what God promises rests not in Abraham who receives the promise, but in God who gives it. The promise is, therefore, unconditional – it depends not on what Abraham does or anything about Abraham himself, but only on God who makes the promise.

And this brings us to see what it means to say that "Abraham believed God". It is not, as we've already noted, that Abraham believed "in" God – which is our particular anxiety today, and especially the focus of much of the atheistic diatribe which is proving so popular at the moment. Abraham's believing God was simply that he trusted God's capacity to deliver what God had promised – a promise which Abraham himself had not even sought but nevertheless valued greatly. It is, in fact, the character of the speech of *this* God, at least, that what is promised takes just this form: God's promises have their "promise", or their reliability, not in *our* ability to make them come into being, but in *God's* ability to do so. God reckons Abraham's trust as righteousness because Abraham has understood what is at stake here: this is something which only God could bring into effect, and his role is simply to trust that this is the case.

What it might mean for this trust to be righteous is something about which we might get into in more detail in the next couple of weeks; for today the point is simply this: to believe "in" God is to trust God – the maker of such promises as this – that those promises of life will be fulfilled, whatever the apparent contradictions in the world might be.

For the world is a contradictory place. Promises are made all the time, and we are only so good at keeping them, and even then they usually only promise us rewards for the good that we do. But to live by a promise which depends not upon me but upon the reliability of the one who makes the promise, this is a very different thing.

If we look for proof of the reliability of the promise to Abraham and the one who makes it, we might only consider that we *are* gathered here today, perhaps 3,500 years after this God met with Abraham, and that this gathering is precisely to *hear the promise again* and to re-orient our lives according to what it says. In all that time, and despite all the horror which might have squeezed any life out of this word, still it rings true, and we gather to hear it again: true life and true freedom spring not from what we can do for ourselves – and so not from what is dependent upon our own strength and wisdom. Such life and freedom comes rather from confidence that, despite the fact that we might fail in our own attempts at promise making and freedom, yet there is one who by his own power is able to set this right, and more. And so he is able also to "reckon as righteousness" – as life, as freedom – our simple trust in him as a basis for our lives.

For this promise and power, and the freedom we know in hearing and trusting it again today, all thanks be to God, now and forever, Amen.