

## **Sermon for the Second Sunday after Pentecost 14 June 2020**

Last week as we celebrated the Trinity, Canon Anne spoke at the end of her sermon about the story of the The Visitors to Abraham at the Oaks of Mamre, and its place particularly in Eastern Orthodox tradition as a figure of the Holy Trinity.

Today, on the second Sunday after Trinity we have that reading set as our first reading. It's a fascinating Scripture story with a fascinating telling.

The story is grounded in hospitality.

The master and mistress, Abraham and Sarah, prepare the meal.

When the three come to Abraham's house to tell of Sarah's future pregnancy, Abraham does not just give them food, but meat, which he prepares on site. This act is impressive. Middle Eastern hospitality requires that he give them food and water - but he didn't need to kill the fatted calf!

Preparing meat is an extensive process, and Abraham did not need go through that process for strangers. Nevertheless, he goes out of his way to feed them the best food.

He hastened into the tent and he said to Sarah, "Make ready quickly three measures of fine flour and make bread."

By the way, this recipe - three measures of meal is referenced in the parable of the leaven in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew. In the story about a woman who hid leaven in three measures of meal, the three measures of meal are a picture of the relationship of God with his people, and this is the key to that parable.

- But back to the story.

Abraham now ran to the herd and picked out a calf and gave it to the servant who hastened to prepare it.

He did it all personally too. Abraham was a wealthy man with servants, but here he himself becomes personally involved. He organises the meal and waits on the visitors himself.

Sarah too is involved, personally making bread, although she too had servants. She herself makes this bread and kneads it and makes it into loaves.

These must be very special visitors.

Who are these three men? One is identified as the Lord. The others are not identified. Are they angels? Are they God as well as in the Orthodox tradition, or is the Lord a prefigured Christ and two angels, as in Calvin's interpretation.

The Scriptures don't much care about these questions. The point is that Abraham was treasured as the friend of God. Someone who could be in God's presence and communicate with God.

In the next section of Genesis, the two others leave to go to Sodom and the Lord remains and speaks with Abraham, as one would to a friend.

*“ But you, Israel, are My servant,  
Jacob whom I have chosen,  
The descendants of Abraham My friend. Isaiah 41.8*

The place of Sarah in the narrative is fascinating too. The story begins with Abraham, but increasingly focuses on Sarah, whose name has just changed like Abraham's to Sarah - meaning princess or ruling woman.

Sarah has a major role in the future of the family. She firstly, arranges for her servant Hagar to be given to Abraham to produce an heir when she cannot, and then forces Abraham to expel Hagar and her son when Sarah has her own son, and it is she who responds to the Lord in this story standing in the entrance to the tent, a significant place to be, where Abraham had stood. She is truly a woman of authority.

As is the case with the wives of all the patriarchs; Rebekah to Isaac, and Rachel to Jacob, each sets the direction of the family's future in one way or another.

The story is increasingly addressed to Sarah because she will be the bearer of the promise.

Let's review. - The chapter begins with the announcement of the arrival of the visitors. First we are told that the Lord appeared and then the three arrived. Abraham treats one with special reverence. The Lord speaks and Abraham speaks to the Lord, but it says THEY ask after Sarah. Then one of them - not the Lord, says that Sarah will bear a child. After Sarah laughs, it is the Lord who asks, *Why did Sarah laugh?*

Of course, she laughs in disbelief that both she and Abraham, who are very old, will be able to have a child. In the chapter before this reading, when the Lord tells Abraham that he will have a child, he has the same response as Sarah. He laughs.

The laughing is important because incredulity is turned into joy with the birth of Isaac.

After the birth of Isaac (meaning he/she will laugh) in chapter 21, the laughter is transformed. Sarah says:

*'God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.'* Genesis 21.6

The laughter of disbelief has now become the laughter of rejoicing. In fact the word laugh in Hebrew can also mean rejoice. The Lord has fulfilled his promise.

Faith, Laughter. What about us?

The life of faith is not one of total belief, but is full of challenges and peppered with unbelief. When we cannot see beyond obstacles sometimes we need to laugh and know that obstacles can be overcome by a relationship with God with us - Jesus himself.

Not that obstacles will be removed the way we want and all will be plain sailing. No. But because of Jesus and our trust in him we to can have friendship with God. Like Abraham and Sarah.

What a privilege. What a joy. **Amen.**