

ADDRESS FOR SUNDAY 2ND FEBRUARY 2020

I wonder how many of you have heard of a Frenchman called Charles Blondin who lived towards the end of the Nineteenth Century. He was a tight-rope walker, and one of the most famous stories about him concerns the time when he set up a rope across Niagara Falls and walked across several times. So confident did he become that he made the journey backwards as well as forwards and performed various tricks on the way, like sitting on a small stool and eating a meal. But the most famous occasion was when he asked for a volunteer to be carried over the Falls on his back. And, in what must surely be one of the most supreme acts of physical trust ever placed by one human being in another, a volunteer did step forward and was indeed safely carried over on Blondin's shoulders.

Over the past four Sundays we have embarked on 2020 Vision, by considering the Creation Stories, events in the Garden of Eden, Noah and the Flood and the Tower of Babel and in each of these we have seen how God's trust in and blessings for his Creation and especially for the humans who were made in his image, never failed despite their descent into wickedness as they persisted in going their own way and failed repeatedly to trust in him.

Today we move into a new section of Genesis – one where we are no longer dealing with humanity as a whole, but in particular with one man, Abram. A man whose supreme trust in a God he had never seen far surpassed the trust of Blondin's volunteer! So, what do we know about this man? Because before we consider the passage from Genesis which was read to us a few moments ago we need to remind ourselves how Abram's story started.

In Genesis Chapter 11 we're told that Abraham was a descendant of Shem, one of the sons of Noah. Then in Genesis Chapter 12 we discover that Abraham lived in Ur of the Chaldees until the family moved to Haran in Mesopotamia. While he was there, God called him to leave that place for another land which would be shown to him, and at the same time promised him that that same land would be given to his descendants and that those descendants would become a great nation - even though, at that point, he and his wife Sarah had no children and were well on in years.

The first seven words in Genesis Chapter 12 – and indeed again in Chapter 15 – give us the clue as to the nature of the relationship which God and Abram shared. **“Now the Lord said to Abram...now the word of the Lord came to Abram...”** These words suggest that from the first God and Abram were in touch with each other. No blinding revelation, no burning bush – God simply spoke, and Abram heard him. And we continually read in Abram's ongoing story that he **“called on the name of the Lord”**. A point to think about – the importance of keeping in touch with God. Because if we don't, how can we properly get to know or understand him, or indeed find out what he wants us to do?

What God initially wanted Abram to do was quite something! **“Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to a land that I will show you”**. Of course, we must get this in its correct perspective. Abram was a nomad and therefore accustomed to folding his tent and moving on when he felt like it. But not out of his country, or away from his people. Nomad though he was, there were territorial boundaries beyond which, in the ordinary way, he would never have considered going. And there was no good reason for moving – no famine, no illness, no war. Yet in obedience to God's command he went, having no idea where he was going - which brings home with staggering clarity the full extent of his faith!

One of the facts that really appeals about Abram's story is that an important new phase of his life only began when he was quite an elderly man! He could have said he was too old or too tired or too settled to start again, but he didn't. An example which, as a Senior Citizen, I find tremendously inspiring and encouraging! And the other appealing fact about Abram is that he wasn't perfect! He certainly had great faith, but, like most of us, there were times when that faith failed quite spectacularly – not least over the question of the promised child.

Let's go back to Blondin's story for a moment. Supposing the man who had volunteered to be carried by Blondin had said when they were halfway across the Falls "Look, this is fine so far, but I really don't trust you any more. Put me down and I'll walk from here on my own". Imagine the response he would have got, not only from Blondin, but from his watching family and friends. Was he crazy? How on earth did he think he could go the rest of the way by himself?

But that is, in effect, what Abram thought. Five times God told him that Sarah would bear him a son, and that his descendants would become a great nation, but he just couldn't believe it – to the extent that he made his own arrangements, and at Sarah's suggestion, took her maid Hagar for his second wife, who indeed bore him a son named Ishmael. But when Sarah finally gave birth to Isaac, all sorts of domestic difficulties arose. Sarah became jealous of Ishmael and told Abraham to send Hagar and her son away, and so he did, in deep distress, leaving them both to wander in the desert, and doubtless wishing he hadn't got himself into such an appalling situation. But God, as ever, was in control. He spoke to Hagar, reassuring her that Ishmael would also be the founder of a great nation – a nation which to this day also calls Abram "Father" and through the Muslim faith worships one God – Allah.

So, on that occasion Abraham massively failed to trust God. But God never stopped trusting Abraham, nor did he withhold the promised blessing from him or from his descendants. And what comfort there is in that. Abraham was an ordinary human being, like us a combination of good and bad, of faith and doubt, and yet God used his life to very significant purpose and, as James tells us in the second chapter of his Letter, was pleased to call him "friend" with all that word implies of mutual love and trust. From Abraham's story we learn the supreme importance of faith in God and obedience to his will, even when the way forward isn't clear to us. Abraham never knew the full extent of God's plan for his people and yet without him that plan, which eventually led to the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus could never have been accomplished.

But there's an even more important message than that for us, one which Paul emphasises in the third chapter of his Letter to the Galatian Christians, part of which Jean read a few moments ago. "You foolish Galatians!" he storms "Who has bewitched you?" Strong words, but for good reason, because he has just heard that the members of the Galatian church are thinking that they will have to be circumcised, in accordance with Jewish law in order to be true members of The New Way. Here's how Tom Wright puts it. **"Paul was concerned about who the Galatians thought they were. Were they part of the Messiah family, the people who belonged to the new age which began with Jesus' death and resurrection? Or were they trying to become part of the physical family of Israel, by circumcision joining the people of God as defined by ethnic origin?"**

We're back to the Blondin story yet again. The Galatians have accepted the gospel – as Paul says, God's spirit has worked in their hearts to bring them to faith – but they're thinking that maybe they should be making their own arrangements in order to identify with the first Chosen People. But Paul will have none of it. He tells them that the present spiritual life of their church and the powerful things God is doing within it, are happening through the work of the Spirit and because of their trust in God's grace. He reminds them that they didn't become Christians through keeping the Jewish Law, but that Christianity starts and continues as a matter of faith.

And then Paul turns to the most important point – and for us this morning's most important 2020 Vision message. He points the Galatians to a man who embodied faith – Abraham; the man to whom God had made the great promise that in him all families of the earth would be blessed. And all Abraham had to do was to believe that promise. So Paul argues that if we believe the gospel of Jesus, who was himself an Israelite, we also are children of Abraham in every sense that matters. And that's an amazing thought – that a blessing which God gave all

those thousands of years ago still is ours today, All we have to do is believe and be thankful, not least because regardless of how humanity's perception of God may have changed and/or been influenced by the passage of time, the God of Abraham is still our God too - the same, yesterday, today and forever.

The whole question of God and his dealing with humanity is so immense that it's sometimes tempting to give up thinking about it. But one of the words which will keep cropping up regularly over the next few months, along with faith and trust, is **blessing**. The dictionary defines "blessing" as **the act of declaring, seeking or bestowing favour – especially divine favour**, and also states that **blessedness is the enjoyment of divine favour**. So, when it all gets too much for us to deal with, a good exercise is simply to consider, enjoy and be thankful for all the blessings of our lives. Because if God, among many other things, is Life, the good things in life are gifts from him. And let's not forget the importance of Abraham – the first individual God chose to trust and to bless, and through him to establish his special people as the channel of his grace in the next part of his plan for the salvation of the world through his Son.

“And God said to Abram “As for me, this is my covenant with you; you shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant to be God to you and to your offspring after you.”

What a staggering thought it is that that promise and that blessing still applies to us.

Amen.