

## Counting Stars

Looking up at the stars on a cloudless night is a great thing to do, particularly if you're away from the light pollution of our city and suburbs, and it's what God had Abram do in our Old Testament reading today.

[God took Abram] outside and said, "He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." (15:5a)

Now counting stars is a tricky thing to do... I've tried it and I confirm it's hard to do. Astronomers give varying estimates of how many stars are visible – but by using photographs (which allows them to tick off the ones they've already counted) it seems there's about 5,000 visible at any time on a good night. But of course the earth rotates on its axis, so even as you're counting them, some will disappear over the horizon, while more will slip into view. And, of course, there are stars in the sky that we can't see without a telescope.

Effectively, you can't count them. Effectively, Abram couldn't have counted them. But he would have known it as a huge number, innumerable.

Abram was an old man at the time – eighty six years old. Old and childless. And his wife, Sarai, was past childbearing age.

But even so, God said to him "So shall your offspring be." (15:5b) as he set him to try and count the stars.

It was, on the face of it, a crazy idea – the idea of an elderly, childless couple having descendants that would be innumerable, like the stars, was – and is – unbelievable.

But as we read the bible, we find more than a few crazy ideas – the biggest one is the message of the cross. Paul sets it out clearly in his first letter to the Corinthians, where he says "...the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing" – unless we have that spark of faith, the message of the cross is crazy – that God, the creator of the universe, would give up his only son to die for the sins of others. But if we have that spark of faith, Paul says "but to us who are being saved it is the power of God".

Abram had faith, though, and he believed this crazy idea – we read in verse 6: Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness

The idea of God promising blessings to Abram wasn't new. The promise – the crazy idea – that is presented here in Chapter 15 of Genesis, builds on a covenant God made with Abram back in Chapter 12:

The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you;

I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing." (12:1-2)

So by the time we get to chapter 15, God had already promised to make Abram into a great nation, and to make his name great... but while Abram had been successful, he had no family, no heir, and so it seemed the covenant wouldn't be fulfilled.

But we know that God is faithful to his promises and God was faithful to Abram, and he is faithful to us, too. Even if we find ourselves unable to trust him some of the time, or in some things – our faith isn't perfect.

And Abram's faith wasn't perfect either, and neither was Sarai's. They found it hard to trust God completely, and they didn't think that God would bless them with a child...so they did what people often do – they tried to solve the problem for themselves: they hatched a plan for Abram to take Hagar (a much younger woman than Sarai) as a concubine, and have a child by her. And they did, and that child was Ishmael... but Ishmael wasn't the family that God had promised.

Abram and Sarai might have had their doubts in God's faithfulness to them, but God was faithful to them, and, ultimately, when Abram was 99, Sarai fell pregnant. And when Abram was 100, Sarai gave birth to Abram's son and heir, Isaac. Isaac who would father Jacob, Jacob who would take the name Israel – and was the beginning of the great nation – God's chosen people – that God had promised Abram.

So it seems that the promises of Genesis 15, and Genesis 12 before it, would be fulfilled. Abram, later to be called Abraham, would start this great nation, and was blessed by God; Abraham's name is remembered as Father Abraham, and indeed he was a blessing to his people.

His descendants would become as innumerable as the stars and all people on earth would be blessed through him.

Of course, Abraham wouldn't live to see the full outworking of the promises he received from God. Hebrews chapter 11 says "All these people [ – Abraham, Sarai, Isaac and Jacob – ] were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. (Heb 11:13)

They all knew the promises of God, they all came to trust the promises of God even though the promises of God hadn't been fully delivered – and wouldn't be fully delivered in their lifetimes.

It's natural to get frustrated when God doesn't deliver according to our timelines, according to what we want, and when our prayers seem not to go unanswered. But we need to be like Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Jacob – and like countless faithful people of all the generations – and trust God, and trust God's timing in things, even if it doesn't match our preferred timings. To have faith in God. To put our hope in God.

The final part of the covenant God entered into with Abram in Genesis 12 was "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" – and we can see now that blessing ultimately came through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

And that blessing is for all people. All of us here. All the faithful Christians of all the ages – all of those who have gone before us, all of those who may come after us. All of us together.

We are part of God's family, and we are blessed through God's promises to Abraham.

In the lead up to the closure of Pymble Chapel a couple of weeks ago, I was there looking at the stained glass windows and the plaques, reading the names and pondering what life would have been like for them, and what they would have thought of the Chapel, and indeed what they would have thought the Chapel today.

Because those people, and all those who have gone before us, are blessed through the promises to Abraham as well.

And the letter to the Hebrews assures us that that Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Jacob “... were still living by faith when they died. “

And it's the same for those who have gone before us. They were living by faith, living in the hope that Jesus brings to us all. Indeed, at Pymble Chapel, there's a stained glass window dedicated to Emma Chapman – who I think is the oldest person commemorated there (she was born in 1820!), the window declares the hope she and so many others had – in the words of the second last verse of the bible “Surely I am coming soon. Amen. Come Lord Jesus”. She was looking forward to the return of Jesus way back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, just like Christians have been doing since Jesus ascended.

In fact, not simply 'looking forward' to it, but longing for it. Hoping it would be soon.

The opening of our Genesis reading, talks of the reward to come for Abraham: From verse 1, “After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.” The reward that God tells Abram about, are not things by the standards of the world, but things of God. Things of the new creation, when everything is put right. When we, and all of those who have gone before us and all who come after us, will be restored to God.

But while we wait for that, while we hope for that, God is with us. “I am your shield” God says to Abraham. “God is our refuge and strength” the psalmist says in psalm 46. But even so, we wait.

People today aren't used to waiting. Even if we don't notice it, instant gratification is the order of the day. Remember lay-buy? That's all but disappeared. Remember cooking porridge for a lengthy time on the stove? Some of us still do it, but 3 minute oats and sachets of instant oats have taken over.

What ever happened to patience? We know that patience is a fruit of the spirit: Paul wrote to the Galatians that “..., the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Gal 5:22-23a, NRSV)

Our experience is so often that when we are not patient, things go wrong.

And certainly, when Abram and Sarai were impatient with God, and Abram took Hagar as a concubine to give him an heir – to fulfil by themselves the promise of God, rather than waiting for God to fulfil it – things went wrong. Abram's son by Hagar, Ishmael opposed Isaac. And many people have observed that the problems of the Middle East today can be traced to the conflict between the descendants of Ishmael and the descendants of Isaac.

So, we need to be patient – we need to be patient with ourselves, with each other, and we need to be patient with God.

We need to be patient, just like we need to be faithful. From time to time we will fail at both! But we need to continue to trust God. Abram stumbled. Sarai stumbled. And so did Isaac and Jacob and David and Elijah – and so many faithful people of all the ages since.

And God wants us to live by faith...

That faith is what binds us together as the church. It is what binds us together with Jesus as the head of the church, with the faithful departed of all the generations, and all those we remember who shine in our hearts like the stars in the night sky, and all those to come.

We share in that faith. And we wait for the day of the Lord. The day when all things are put right.

We long for that day, but we must be patient. And as we wait, we must be strong in our faith – to know in our hearts that “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son” (John 3:16). That won't change – that can't change. Remember Jesus' words from the cross “It is finished” (John 19:30). The work of salvation is complete. The work of our salvation is complete – we await, with all those who have gone before us, its ultimate fulfilment.

Amen. Come Lord Jesus.