

Follow my leader

Gen.12. 1-4a

As some of you may be aware, for some years I was the Chairman of FLAME – the Family Life and Marriage Education Network in the Church of England – now sadly defunct. So the way we are as families has been one of my major concerns. So you can imagine that I have concerns about people who seem to abuse their families in various ways. Take for example a man who decides to uproot his family and emigrate, not after any consultation with them, but just because he thinks that is what God wants him to do. Or take a man who decides to practise mutilation of his son's genitals; or a man who has children with more than one woman at the same time; or a man who marries his sister; or a man who contemplates killing his own son, and comes very close to doing so.

Not the kind people you would want to hold up as an example to others, are they? As you may have realised already, all these men of dubious character are actually all the same person – the man who started out life as Abram, but became known as Abraham. We hear about him in both our Old Testament and New Testament readings today.

What we heard about was the decision to uproot his family from what I suppose we would now call Iraq, and make a long and arduous journey to what we now call Israel or Palestine. Because he had to avoid the desert, it would have been about 2,000 miles. I reckon that at the very minimum, that must have taken about two years. Because although our reading simply said 'and Lot went with him' we are actually talking about his whole extended family – hundreds of them, probably, together with their slaves, and their animals. It is a mass migration – and all because he believes God has promised them a new home.

And all those other things I mentioned we also read about in the Bible. Circumcision has become acceptable because Jews and Muslims have always practised it. But if wasn't like that, and some religious leader today said that in future all boys had to be circumcised as part of their religion, there would be an outcry about child abuse. And someone who got to the stage of tying his teenage son to an altar and raising a knife to kill him as a sacrifice to a god would be in prison or Broadmoor quicker than a hot knife through butter.

But Abraham was a vital leader – an essential part of God's purpose for his people. And he did many things which were quite remarkable. And despite acting out of convictions that God was telling him to do various things, he also challenges God about his intended destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah – you remember he argues that if he can find even ten faithful people there, God should not do as he threatened. In a chapter about Abraham in a book about Old Testament characters, Jonathan Magonet, who is a Jewish Rabbi said this ' With such a figure as Abraham we can never be completely at ease. But without a figure of such challenging power and authority perhaps the rest of the Hebrew Bible would never have been created'. And as Christians, we might say that the story of his people, leading to the birth of Jesus

might not have happened. In Romans Paul talks about Abraham being ‘father of us all’ because our faith springs from the faith he had in God’s purpose.

I say all this because it is important that we read the stories of these great men of God with our eyes wide open, and seeing that although God used them, they were like any of the rest of us – not perfect, people who sometimes get it wrong – sometimes very wrong!

Hopefully later this year you will have a new Priest-in-Charge – and one who I have every confidence God has called to your parish. He or she probably won’t have to travel 2000 miles to get to Ludlow, and he almost certainly won’t bring his extended family and flocks of goats with him or her! But whoever it is will have had to have the conviction that this is where God wants him or her to be. But think of yourselves not as the inhabitants of Canaan, where Abraham arrived eventually, but rather as that person’s fellow-travellers on a journey you will make together. And like Abraham, you don’t know where that journey will end up. St Laurence’s is set to embark on another stage of its journey with God. And those journeys are usually full of surprises, because we never know what God has in mind for us.

It is good to have a leader, and we all need people who will challenge us and inspire us to do things that we would not otherwise dream of. But that person can’t do it alone. The risk for any parish is that once their new incumbent arrives, everyone sits back and expects him or her to get on with it. If you do that, you will soon have an exhausted Priest, and you won’t have made any progress on your journey. This is a shared story, and although whoever comes will have an important part to play in it, they can’t play all the characters.

In what I say now I am using he/him, but that is not to presume the gender of the new Priest – I am just saving a lot of repetition of ‘he or she’ and so on. So look after that person well, so that he can look after you well. Make sure he has your support and that he knows he has it. Pray for him regularly, because apart from anything else that will help you find out what *you* part is in the shared enterprise. Make sure he has proper time off – which means respecting his day off. It means making sure he has time to go on a retreat, has time to study and to pray himself. You need him to be someone who can *be* as well as someone who will *do* things.

And thinking of Abraham, accept the fact that he won’t always get it right. Abraham was a flawed human being, but God used him to bring about a major development in the story of our knowledge of him. You and I, and your next Priest, are also flawed human beings. But that is what we offer to God week by week. And the miracle is that God uses our imperfect lives to be part of the work of the kingdom. As Paul said – ‘his strength is made perfect in our weakness’. We are earthenware pots, he says, but rough and ready as we are, we can help bring in the kingdom for which we pray in the Lord’s Prayer. Abraham, that flawed man, set out on his journey with faith and hope. May God bless you in the journey you are about to begin. I know he will.