

Sermon, June 11, 2023

Romans 4:13-25

“The Righteousness of Faith”

Abraham is one of the most important figures in the Bible. His name comes up throughout both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. In fact, we are known as one of three Abrahamic religions - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But why? What did he do to make him so important? He was not a great thinker or writer. He was not a great statesman, warrior, or leader. The answer lies in verse 3 of this chapter of Romans. “Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness”. In other words, it is through Abraham that we first learn the meaning of faith. He is, in fact, referred to as ‘the father of faith’.

We are told in the Book of Genesis that the Lord said to Abram, later to be called Abraham, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land I will show you. And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing”. This was God’s promise to Abraham, and Abraham chose to believe and to obey.

In the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, we are told that “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance, and he set out, not knowing where he was going”. That verse tells us certain things about faith. First, Abraham went on a long camping trip. He journeyed from place to place, following the instructions of God. What this tells us is that faith is a journey - that true faith is not something that we cling to at various times in our lives - particularly when things are not going our way. It is an ongoing journey throughout our lives in good times and in bad. We place our trust in God.

This does not mean that there won’t be times when our faith begins to waver. For example, God had promised Abraham that his descendants would be as many as the stars above. But how could this be possible. Both Abraham and his wife were elderly and had no children of their own. So, through the instigation of his wife Abraham entered into relationships with the Egyptian handmaiden, Hagar, who gave birth to a son named Ishmael. This we can see as a wavering of faith, but it was not in accordance with God’s will. But the Lord assured Abraham that his elderly wife would bear a child. When Sarah overheard this she laughed. It must surely have sounded absurd. But Sarah did have a child, and the child was named Isaac, which, in Hebrew, literally means ‘laughter’. In a way we can say God had the last laugh, but we can also here it as a laughter of surprise brought on by the realization that God does, indeed, work in mysterious ways!

Secondly, referring to that verse in Hebrews where it says that Abraham "...set out, not knowing where he was going". Here we see that faith is often blind. In other words, we place our trust in God not knowing exactly where we are being led - and often surrounded by circumstances that seem to be contrary to our hoped-for destination. As it says in the well-known verses at the beginning of chapter eleven in Hebrews. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible". We cannot see God, nor can we perceive the word of God that responds to our hopes in God's own time and God's own way." All we can do is cling to the assurance that God is amid it all.

Now, most of our reading today has to do with Paul's argument concerning the relation between the law and faith. By the law Paul is not referring to what we might think of as our penal code, but, rather, that handed down by God referring to things like dietary restrictions, or what can and cannot be done on the Sabbath. And, again, referring to Abraham Paul wrote, "For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith".

To begin with, of course the promise to Abraham did not come through the law! The law did not exist at that point. It would come later as it was handed down through Moses. Secondly, I don't think that the law is wrong or evil. After all, it was handed down by God, and a God of love does not hand down that which is evil. And, as an observant Jew, Paul does not see the law as evil, but that the law in and of itself is a problem apart from faith. I think we also have to keep in mind who Paul was writing to in Rome. Many of the new Christians there were Gentiles. The Mosaic law had no bearing on their lives.

But Paul's primary concern is what justifies us in the eyes of the Lord. It is not that the law is of no value. It helps to maintain social cohesion. But the following of the law, or the doing of good works is not what justifies us in the eyes of God. We are justified through God's grace alone, which we receive through faith. By opening our hearts, our minds, and our spirits to the grace that God extends out of love, and through the trust we have in God, we find salvation. Amen.

Let us pray: God, whose love knows no bounds, whose grace extends to all of your children and Creation as a whole, we praise your Holy Name, and offer thanksgiving for the many blessings we receive today and always. We thank you that through your Son Jesus the depth of your love is revealed as we accept in faith that we are justified in your eyes - that we are freed from the bondage of our sinfulness and walk in newness of life. We thank you for the gift of

faith, and that in that faith we are empowered to do good works , to be a help to those in need, to bring healing for the sick and injured, to give comfort for the dying, to bring good news and uplift to the poor, and sustenance for the hungry, to seek Justice and peace in the world, and to give care for your Creation. We pray for your Church and for our congregation, asking for renewal through and in the power of your Holy Spirit...Amen.