

Words become flesh

In our passage from the 4th chapter of his letter to the Romans from which we read earlier Paul puts a pretty positive spin on his description of Abraham. He paints a pretty flattering picture of Abraham's reception of the astounding news that he was to be a father and indeed the father of many nations many, many years after he had begun drawing his pension. We read that, 'Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become the father of nations', and that 'he did not weaken in his faith when he considered his own body which was already as good as dead (for he was about one hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb'. So – in Paul's account Abraham just believed what he had been promised by God: no doubts, no questions, no 'buts', and Abraham's faith is extolled.

I can't help wondering, though, if it was really like that. After all, God promised Abram a son and a sky full of descendants but God sure took a long time to make that come true. The promise actually first comes to Abram back in Genesis 12 when he is just a spring chicken aged 75. 'I will make of you a great nation' God tells him, and even then Abe probably has to turn up his hearing aid to catch what God is saying. But no sign of an offspring appears and so in chapter 15 Abram has a bit of a whinge and God has to reassure him: 'Just be patient!' says God (in so many words). But Abram is not very patient and while somewhere in his heart he may still have believed by chapter 16, out of sheer desperation, he goes along with his wife Sarai's suggestion that he has a fling with their Egyptian servant Hagar and they have a child. It's as if Abram is saying to God, 'well, if you aren't going to move on this, I will!' And now in chapter 17, at the age of ninety-nine, fully 25 years after the original promise was given – 25 years of waiting! - and with hearing aids in both ears and a zimmer frame by the door, Abram is visited by God once again and the promise is repeated as God makes a covenant with Abram, an agreement that God really will make Abram the ancestor of a multitude of nations and will give them land into the bargain. And 'I will be their God', says the Lord.

Well, no wonder Abraham laughs. After all those years of waiting and disappointment, no wonder he fell on his face and laughed like a drain – a hollow laugh, a bitter laugh, a laugh born of frustration and disappointment and heartache. 'Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can

Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?', he asks as his face hits the dust. And in that cry do we not hear echoes of the anguish that we all feel when God does not act as we long for God to act, when God does not seem to keep faith and keep promises, or when God seems to keep us waiting, waiting, waiting – endlessly. Do we not hear in that cry something of the ambiguity and ambivalence of faith in a God who seems at times to fail to deliver the goods, or indeed to be absent altogether? So - Abraham 'did not weaken in his faith', says St Paul. But didn't he? Are you sure, Paul? Or again, 'No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God' says Paul – but is that true? As Abram fell on his face with his hollow laugh was he thinking, 'I believe!' – or was he muttering to God, 'you cannot be serious!'

Well, God was serious. Indeed he was so serious that he did something very strange. What God did was to seal this promise upon Abraham's flesh. Having made this agreement, this covenant with Abraham, having made the promise to Abraham of descendants and of land, God says, 'Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.' Now, I have to say that I don't really get this. Why this rather strange ritual? Why circumcision of all things? Why this painful and rather embarrassing procedure? Is it that God wills to leave a mark upon that male organ from which the seed will come that will produce descendants and so fulfil God's promise? Who knows? But what matters here is that God's word, God's promise, God's covenant is here inscribed physically on Abraham. The promise is not just words, words, words – there is this physical sign that accompanies the promise. And from then on whenever Abraham felt impotent and feared that God's Word was tarrying he only needed to look down to see the promise cut into his very flesh. And so it is with God's Word – it is accompanied by the physical sign. Word and physical expression go together.

Think of other examples. Think of the story we read last week, the story of Noah and the flood. You recall how after the flood God promises never again to destroy the earth. He makes a covenant with the earth, a promise that forevermore the earth will be preserved, even in the face of human wickedness and violence. And less humanity forget – and less God forget! – there is the rainbow. The word, the promise, the covenant is set physically in a sign, a perpetual reminder. And in years to come God will keep this promise to

Abraham and descendants will come forth and they will find themselves trapped and imprisoned in Egypt and God will deliver them and lead them to the land that has been promised to them. And on the way, on a smoke-wrapped mountain, God will make a covenant with them, a promise that echoes the promise made to Abraham, that 'I will be your God and you shall be my people'. And we read that after that covenant had been agreed and the promises made Moses and the people of Israel 'beheld God, and they ate and drank.' Up there, on the mountain, they ate and drank together! And the reason they ate and drank was that because, again, words are not enough. They need to be accompanied by the physical sign. The word must become flesh as people eat and drink and digest the promise and absorb the covenant into their very bodies. And in the centuries that followed as the people of Israel lived their tumultuous life with God and as they passed through the fire as a nation and at times the covenant seemed to be abandoned and the promises broken still they had the sign of circumcision scarred on their bodies, and still they ate and drank at certain seasons in order to remember, in order to cling fast to the promises by which they lived.

And of course in the fullness of time God's Word becomes flesh once and for all. God's Word become flesh, full of grace and truth in a Galilean peasant, Jesus of Nazareth – because once again words are not enough and the embrace of God's covenant that gathers up all humanity into the arms of God must be carved into the flesh of the human race. And when, like Abraham, we wonder and we doubt and we question the faithfulness of God then we look to him, we look to God's great act of circumcision, to God's everlasting mark upon human flesh that is Jesus Christ.

And the challenge for us is to make the word become flesh, to take words about God and to make them physical – and thank God for when that happens. To take one example that will stay with me for a long time: many of you know that three of us have just returned from Malawi where we were visiting Mulanji Mission which our church supports and which today, as always on Communion Sunday, you have an opportunity to donate to as you leave. Mulanje Mission is a complex with a hospital with a maternity unit and an HIV clinic and a school and a youth project and much besides in what is the sixth poorest country in the world. And the Mission has deep Christian roots, and at its centre is a church where the community worship and prays. One of their projects is a Palliative Care Team that goes out into the villages and treats the

sick and the dying, and one afternoon I was privileged to accompany a palliative care nurse as she visited a home. I went with her into the poorest home I have ever set foot in, a basic brick building without electricity though with the relative luxury of a tap outside, and I was taken into this small room with bare, scarred walls. And there on the concrete floor, lying on a blanket, was a man with soiled bandages wrapped round his leg which skin cancer had left raw. And I watched as that nurse slowly and carefully cut off the old bandages, and then so tenderly washed his wounds and sprinkled powdered medicine on them and then gently wrapped new, clean bandages round his leg. And in those moments that room became a holy place. There in that little room the word became flesh as all that is proclaimed in the Mission's church week after week in words took physical expression. And in many ways what happened there in that room crystallised and distilled all that is done at the Mulanji Mission in the hospital and the maternity unit and the HIV clinic and the school and everywhere else.

You see, the question is, how do you believe in God when you look at a land like Malawi where there is such poverty and injustice and deprivation? How is faith in God possible in a world with aching sores like this? How do you believe when nothing ever seems to change and the future seems hopeless? How do you hold onto faith when you are faced with Abram's dilemma – when God's promises seem to be failing and God appears absent and we are waiting, waiting, waiting for the kingdom but it never seems to come? Well, belief is only possible when words, teachings, doctrines become flesh. Belief is only made credible when it is cut into suffering human flesh.

You see live today in a world of words. Words bombard us from electronic devices and somewhere in that blizzard of words are words about God, and faith and salvation and eternal life. But where do those words become flesh? Where do those words become inscribed – or circumcised – upon us? This morning we gather here around this table and like Moses and the Israelites on the mountain we eat and drink with God. And here God's covenant with us and all its promises become tangible and edible in bread and wine. And from this table let us take God's Word with us out into the world, embodied in us, that word may become flesh there and that the world may believe. Amen.

Holy and loving God,
we praise and worship you,
the God of Abraham and Sarah,
the God who calls into existence things that are not,
the God who gives life to the dead,
the faithful God who makes promises and keeps them:
all glory, praise and honour be unto you!

You are the God who has spoken to us,
revealing to us your Word,
and who in the fullness of time has come amongst us
in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh.
O God forgive us for when our faith remains mere words,

for when we fail to live it and to put faith into action,
or when our actions contradict our words
and when we deny with our lives
what we proclaim with our lips.

O God, have mercy upon us and forgive us, we pray.
Keep faith with us, even when we are faithless or unfaithful.

And we praise you for the gospel assurance
that you are ever ready to forgive and to make things new.

Come to us now we pray.

Meet us here in our worship,
in our words and our songs
and in bread and wine and in one another,
and go with us back into the world,
forgiven and changed.

We pray these things in the name of Jesus,
our Lord and saviour. Amen.

O loving God,

We pray today that you would show us
how to put our faith into action,
how the words we speak and the faith we profess
might take shape in our homes,
and among our families and friends,
and at our work,
and wherever we are called to live out the faith we profess.

O God we pray today for those who
struggle to believe,
for those whose find faith difficult intellectually,

for those who face the anguish of unanswered prayer,
for those for whom you seem to be distant or absent,
for those who cannot square your truth with
their experience of suffering or loss.

O God give them Abraham's faith is alive
and enduring even when stretched.

And we pray for Malawi and for nations like it
that are locked into poverty and where
injustice and corruption robs people of what is rightly theirs.

O God bring your kingdom of righteousness and peace.

And we pray today again for Mulanji Mission,

Especially for Ruth Shakespeare,

medical director of the hospital,

that you will meet their needs and enable the hospital
and all the projects to flourish.

O God bless those who cannot gather with us today
around your table because of sickness or infirmity.

May they know that they are united with us in the Spirit
and may they know through our actions that they
are part of us and belong to us.

We pray all these things in the name of Jesus Christ,

Our Lord and saviour. Amen.