

The last laugh.

I guess that if we are honest we would have to say that the Bible is not a barrel of laughs. People turn to Holy Scripture in pursuit of inspiration, or in search of comfort and solace, but rarely do we pick up the Bible because we are looking for a chuckle. It is not a treasury of one-liners and side-splitters. That's why our passage from Genesis this morning is noteworthy. Our reading ends with an old man, Abram, falling on his face and laughing and I want to spend a little time this morning thinking about that laugh and how it might address us now.

Before doing that, however, I want to take you back to an earlier verse in the Book of Genesis, a verse which is background to our reading and one which is no laughing matter but is profoundly sad. It comes back in chapter 11 and it's the phrase, 'now Sarah was barren, she had no child.' Now, you may think, 'well, that's a quite sad verse, as for some childlessness can be very sad' – but I want to suggest that this verse is even sadder than you think. And to understand this we have to go right back to the beginning of Genesis, to the story of creation in the first chapter, and to a phrase that occurs twice there and it is, 'be fruitful and multiply!' That phrase indicates that God wants the world to be a fertile and fruitful place, a zone teeming with life. And then as we read on in Genesis we find that the world becomes a violent and deathly place, a realm so full of corruption that God decides to begin over again and start a new world. And so we have the story of the flood and it ends with Noah and his family stepping out into a fresh new world. And what does God say to Noah and his family straight away? Why, he says, 'be fruitful and multiply!' And in case someone isn't paying attention he repeats it a few verses later: 'be fruitful and multiply' – and so the command is given twice, just as it was first time round in the original creation.

So, are you beginning to get the impression that God really, really, wants the world to be a fertile place, alive with life? But then as we read on through Genesis we find things going wrong again – and that brings us finally to the end of the whole first section of the book and that verse from chapter 11 which I quoted, 'Now Sara was barren, she had no child.' And in this context this description applies not just to Sarah but to the whole creation: created for life it has become a death zone. Created to be fruitful it has turned barren. What we have here is not just a description of Sara's womb, not just a medical report

on Sara's fertility. What we have here is a verdict on the whole show. This world has played out, reached a dead end. It has nowhere to go, no future. It's barren. That's why this verse is so sad.

And with this background we come to our story this morning. What is God's response to this barren world? What does God do next? Well, God's response is to raise up a people, a special nation, who will embody life. This will be Israel, pictured in the Old Testament as a tree or a vine called to bear fruit. In the way they live, in their devotion to God, this people will be a force for life in a world gone barren - in fact their motto will be, 'Choose Life'. And so you imagine God putting this plan into operation and choosing a couple to be the parents of this new people. And who would you choose for such a task? Well, maybe some fit young couple who will get the ball rolling by having loads of children. Maybe the ancient equivalent of Beyoncé and Jay-Z. And who does God choose for this injection of fertility? Old, barren Sarah, and even older, wrinkled, Abram. So God says to Abram in our passage, 'I will make you exceedingly numerous... the ancestor of a multitude of nations...' And in verse 6 we find the F-word: 'I will make you exceedingly fruitful...' Here are echoes of the original creation mandate, repeated at the time of the flood, 'Be fruitful...' And so God's plan for life goes on - but through an aged, geriatric couple. What a laugh! This is why the passage ends with Abraham falling on his face. He actually falls on his face twice in this passage - once in verse 3 where he collapses in awe and worship, and now inverse 17, in laughter at the absurdity of what God has told him.

So this passage with its background introduces us to laughter and I want to think about this further and to consider three different kinds of laughter that are associated with the Christian faith, three laughs that we encounter in the Christian life. The first kind is the laughter of ridicule and scorn. To put it bluntly, Abram is being asked to believe something utterly ridiculous, something patently absurd, something that stretches credibility to breaking point. This is laughter that is provoked by the sheer folly of what faith is called to believe. And Christian faith has always been prone to such ridicule, not least in its earliest days and now, in our contemporary time. Right from the start, the idea that in the bruised and bloodied face of a crucified criminal, a failed messiah executed in the most despised manner imaginable, we see the face of God, is a complete joke. No wonder that one of the first depictions of Jesus in the history of art is as a crucified figure with the head of an ass. Doubtless this

reflects the early Christians' awareness of the absurdity of their claims about Christ. It was worthy of ridicule. In fact, one of the great early theologians of the Church, Tertullian, declared, 'I believe because it's absurd'. So, in our reading from Mark's Gospel this morning we are not told that Peter laughed at Jesus, we are told he rebuked him – but he might have laughed with this kind of laughter of scorn. After all, Peter had just identified Jesus as the Messiah, and now Jesus was talking about undergoing great suffering and being killed. But hang on a minute: messiahs don't suffer! Messiahs don't get killed! The whole idea is absurd. And as we look at this Messiah we hear the laughter of the guards who crucified him and the passers by who, we are told, mocked him for claiming to be the Messiah. And as Christianity stopped being persecuted and became the religion of the empire and the establishment it was sanitised and rationalised and it was no longer laughed at. Its absurdity was eclipsed. But now, of course, in our secular age it is becoming the target of ridicule once again – as it should be. As Christians we rejoice in such ridicule for seen from its true perspective there is something wildly crazy about our faith, something gloriously nonsensical about this God and his Christ that will always appear foolish to this world.

So that's the first laughter that we hear coming from Abram, the laughter of ridicule and it's part and parcel of our faith. The second kind, however, is harder for us to live with. It's the laughter of faith under pressure, the laughter of faith being stretched and strained. The sound of this laughter is the sound of faith creaking. It has a cynical edge to it and there is a strong strain of this in Abram's laugh. Think of it this way. Abram has been waiting a long time for this promised child. This episode here in Genesis 17 is not the first time that she has been promised a child. Indeed since right back in Genesis 12 – twenty four years earlier - this has been an ongoing issue with God repeatedly reassuring Abraham that a child was coming. But the question was 'when?'. Twenty four years of waiting, waiting, waiting - and Abram is not getting any younger. And now the promise returns. And this therefore is the cynical laugh of faith that is over-stretched. It's the jaded laugh that says, 'Yeah, right... sure thing!' There is a tension between what Abram wants to believe and what is actually happening in his life. Hence his bitter laugh.

That laughter, if we are honest, is surely a feature of our Christian faith. We want to believe, but... We want to believe that God is love but there is a tension with our experience of an often brutal and loveless world. We want to

believe that our prayers are heard but there is a contradiction when we experience disappointment. We so want to believe that God is real but sometimes we seem to experience only an absence, emptiness, a void. We want to believe that good will triumph over evil and love over hate, but sometimes we wonder. And so our faith makes us laugh: the joyless, brittle laugh of doubt and disappointment and disbelief.

But then there is the third laughter – what we might call ‘the last laugh’. And for this we must leave Abram and Genesis and move to the Book of Psalms and Psalm 2. There we read this:

Why do the nations conspire,
 And the peoples plot in vain?
 The kings of the earth set themselves,
 And the rulers take counsel together,
 Against the Lord and his anointed...’

So the psalmist looks out at a world which turns against God, where the powerful and the rulers oppose and resist the rule of God. and it’s not so very hard for us to hear echoes of our on world today. And this is a world where it seems sometimes that evil triumphs over good and justice does not prevail. But then we read on in this psalm and what follows? Well, this:

‘He who sits in heaven laughs;
 The Lord has them in derision...’

Get that? He who sits in heaven laughs! This is a God who says, ‘I have established a covenant with the world, and that means that I stand in solidarity with it and I will not let it be hijacked by mere mortals. And so I laugh!’ And this God says, ‘I am the God of Abram, an old man who was far too old to have children. But I am making a covenant with him with a promise that he will be fruitful and multiply and be the father of many nations. He laughed when he heard that and I laugh too – but I’ll have the last laugh!’ And this is a God who has come amongst us in covenant solidarity in one of Abram’s descendants, and has faced down evil and all the destructive powers of death. And while the sound of cries and tears may at times seem overwhelming, finally the tears will be dried and the cries silenced. And then there will be only be laughter.

Beyond the laughter of scorn, beyond the laughter of faith stretched there is, finally, God’s last laugh. And if you listen for it, you’ll hear it even now. Amen .

Holy and loving God,
God of Abraham and Sarah,
God of Peter and Paul,
God of Mary and of our Lord Jesus Christ,
we worship and praise your holy name.
You are the God who calls into existence
things that are not;
you are the God who gives life to the dead
and strength to the weary;
you are the God who makes possible the impossible
and who brims and overflows with life.

We worship you.

And we come to you this morning,
our Maker who has made us for yourself,
aware our failures and our regrets,
conscious of our sins and our guilt,
seeking life in all its fullness,
but sensing sometimes that we are running on empty.
And so we come one more and we confess our sins,
and we acknowledge our need of your grace and your love.

Come, Lord and fill us.

Come, Lord and may your grace increase and multiply in us;
Reassure us that you have bound yourself to us
with a covenant love that will not let go.

And we pray in Jesus' name and in his words
we pray together saying...