

Blessed to Bless

Many of us who attend this church have relocated from other countries and gather here because we find it a welcoming worshipping community. It's a church that can cope with the diversity of cultures, denominations and experience represented in this room this morning.

I'm sure you'll agree that relocation to the Netherlands raises many challenges:

Language: the mysteries of the Dutch language and the fact that at times even Dutch people speak the language differently!

Food: for us coming from Northern Ireland this wasn't such a big deal; we share a similar fixation with the potato, but I can appreciate for many of you stamppot and Dutch pancakes might not have the same attraction as a spicy curry or some other form of colourful food.

Weather: like potatoes, we Irish share a lot in common with the Dutch when it comes to weather. We simply pass on to you what hits us first from the Atlantic. But I know that for some the cold, the dark, the chill winds are a challenge.

Landscape: what landscape? I hear you ask!

I'm still amazed that for the past four years we have lived, worked and worshipped below sea level. Oh, how we miss the rolling hills of County Down in Northern Ireland.

There are, of course, many positives: the copious use of butter and almonds in pastries; the fact that all you need is a bicycle to travel the length and breadth of the land and there's the excellent integrated transport; Dutch pragmatism, the willingness to find a way to make things work rather than get bogged down in endless bureaucracy; and of course the availability of decent coffee at every turn.

Most of us who have relocated here will have had the opportunity to make some preparation, get some sense of the country and how it operates, maybe even have a company or friend pave the way for us.

But what must it be like for someone who finds themselves in unfamiliar territory – the refugee who is resettled by a UN agency, the people crossing the Mediterranean from various parts of Africa in small boats, landing on another continent without any knowledge of language, culture or what to expect?

That must be a difficult experience.

What would it have been like for Terah and his family to leave the home of their ancestors and travel into another land?

Genesis 11 tells us that Terah (the father of Abram) lived about 200 miles south of what we now call Baghdad in Iraq. He leaves his home and wider family and sets out with Abram (later known as Abraham), Nahor and his grandson Lot and travels the 12-1400 km to what we know as southern Turkey to a place called Haran.

His intention was to go even further – to travel on to what is today known as Israel and Palestine - another 1000km - but Terah decides to settle in what we know as Southern Turkey.

When Terah dies, Abram, at the age of 75, responds to God's call and carries on the journey originally started many years previously.

We have four short sentences in the opening section of Genesis 12, but they represent a huge upheaval in Abram's life and their impact resonates down through the centuries to the present day.

On a purely practical level Abram had to gather up his household – which doesn't mean wife Sarah and a few servants. Already Abram would have been a wealthy and successful animal herder and merchant. Moving Abram's household would have entailed many people, children, animals, tents and belongings.

Verse 16 of Chapter 12 tells us that when in Egypt Abram had sheep, oxen, donkeys, male and female slaves and camels. We know that in Chapter 14 Abram was able to take with him 318 trained fighters from his household to go and rescue his nephew Lot who had got into a bit of trouble.

Clearly Abram was the head of a very large household, a significant community.

So, when Abram felt God's call to leave what was familiar and head off into unfamiliar territory, it was a huge undertaking. As a nomadic herdsman and merchant, he would be constantly passing through or setting up his tents on the land of strangers. He had no guarantee of safety and no guarantee of a final destination. Responding to this sense of call was no simple or easy thing to do.

From a faith perspective it was also a huge step into the unknown. Whatever understanding he had of God – we don't know how that was formed – he commits to a journey holding on to the promise that God would make of him a great nation, and will bless him, and make his name great, so that he will be a blessing.

He's 75, he has no children, but he uproots his community and travels into the unknown with the promise to become a great nation – that takes some faith and we know that more than once his faith falters on the way.

However, the thing that really stands out for me is the promise that Abram would be a blessing and that *'...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'* It can also be translated that *'...by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves'*.

There is no doubt that many of the peoples of the earth bless themselves in Abraham's name.

The Jews have always understood their origin to lie in the great patriarch Abraham. Tracing their history through Isaac, the son of promise, many Jews see themselves to be sons of Abraham and the heirs of the promise made to him by God.

Even in contemporary politics, Israeli politicians invoke the name of Abraham, as Mr Netanyahu did recently when visiting the US president and praising his Middle East peace plan.

Muslims, too, revere the name of Abraham as one who obediently and faithfully followed the will of Allah and rejected the pagan gods and worship of his ancestors. The prophet Muhammad places Abraham at the centre of the Muslim story and faith, seeing the Arab peoples as the descendants of Ishmael – Abraham's firstborn son to his wife's maid Hagar.

I remember that, speaking on the day that King Hussain of Jordan died, Netanyahu spoke in very conciliatory tones of how he hoped that the divided children of Abraham – Israeli and Arab – might yet live together in peace. I'm not sure that his actions since bear out his words.

Christians worship a descendant of Abraham called Jesus and trace Jesus' story down through Abraham's line.

The three great monotheistic faiths, constituting more than half the world's population, all bless themselves, in one way or another, in Abraham's name.

Yet, today we witness the ongoing animosity of Jew and Muslim in the politics and violence of the Middle East.

While there are many individuals and groups of Jews and Muslims who work for reconciliation and mutual understanding, their voices are all too often drowned out by the noise of political rhetoric and vitriol or the noise of rockets and gun fire.

Today we witness the rejection of Muslim migrants by governments such as Hungary, as they defend their allegedly Christian country.

When I visited Poland recently, fellow Christians spoke openly of how they just don't like Muslims and don't want them in their country. Across Europe - West, Central and Eastern Europe - Christian/Muslim tensions increase.

Antisemitism is rearing its head increasingly in parts of Europe, among both the left and right wings of politics.

It seems that these ancient rivalries are alive and well.

It is a great tragedy that Abraham, intended to be a blessing to the nations, has become a central figure in the ongoing antagonism and conflict between those that trace the origins of their faith back to him.

What kind of blessing is that?

However, I think that the story of Abraham setting out into the unknown, with the promise of being a blessing to the nations, presents us Christians with a real challenge as to how we think about ourselves and how we relate to others in today's world.

I don't think it is unfair to say that, by and large, as Christians, we prefer the settled life rather than a life of constant movement and change.

Some people thrive on adventure, the uncertainty of what lies ahead, but the history of the Christian church suggests that it is a minority of pioneers who break out of the normal, settled routine of church life. The pioneers who head off into the unknown among unreached people groups or migrant and refugee camps are a tiny minority.

Most of us prefer something more settled, a familiar place to gather, a routine to follow, a measure of predictability in Christian life.

That's not of itself a failing or a weakness. Routines are important – they sustain us, they challenge us, scripture commends certain rituals, festivals, practices.

But thinking about Abraham - and his willingness to move out into the unknown in order to experience and fulfil the promise to be a blessing to others - raises questions of whether we too often hide behind familiar routine.

What blessing do we miss out on if we only cling to the familiar?

What element of our calling do we miss out on if we only cling to the familiar?

Perhaps more importantly, what blessing do we fail to be for others if we only cling to the familiar?

Our OT reading from Genesis is paired with the NT reading from John 3.

At first glance they seem to be a strange combination – is there a connection between the two, is there meant to be a connection and, if so, what might it be?

The John 3 reading is well known for its terminology of being ‘born again’, a phrase associated with a particular understanding of how a person becomes a Christian, or even a designation of what constitutes a real Christian.

But the John 3 passage read to us earlier provides us with an encounter between a Pharisee - a perfectly decent religious man called Nicodemus, who lives within a settled religious community - and Jesus, who disturbs that religious world.

Nicodemus is struggling to make sense of the lifestyle and teaching of this fellow Jew and Rabbi called Jesus who is charting a new course, breaking out of the traditional and familiar and proclaiming a different way, but yet seems to have the blessing of God on his life and ministry.

The point that the gospel writer wants to make in this passage is not about the blindness of this particular Pharisee but is a point about the difficulty for anyone to grasp the vast scope of what God was doing for the nations of the world in the person of Jesus.

Sitting in the familiar surroundings of Jerusalem during one of the most familiar religious festivals, Passover, Jesus tries to help Nicodemus understand that God’s intention is to bless the world and that stretches far beyond Jerusalem, far beyond the Jewish people and far beyond familiar religious festivals.

That’s the context of these most familiar of verses:

So must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

It’s going to be a challenge for Nicodemus to understand that the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus will not be found within the confines of Jerusalem, or within the confines of religious purity, or even within the confines of one community of people.

It was not just a challenge for Nicodemus – it was an enormous challenge for the disciples. They too thought of God’s blessing within the context of their Jewish faith and community.

We see that in their attitude to their near neighbours, the Samaritans.

In Luke 9 the disciples are passing through Samaria and are looking for hospitality on their journey. When the people of a Samaritan village refuse hospitality to Jesus and the disciples James and John respond with:

“Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?”^[k] 55

Jesus turned and rebuked them, but we get a snapshot of the narrowness of their vision of God’s Kingdom at that early stage in ministry.

But we still hear it in the voices of the disciples after Jesus’ resurrection when they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

His response to them is “...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”.

As with Nicodemus, the disciples too need to have a much bigger vision of what God intends in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

There is a danger for us of becoming comfortable with the familiar routines of Christian life. It is possible that we too miss the breadth, the scale of what God intends for this world and its peoples.

The scope of God’s mercy and grace stretches far beyond the boundaries of our creeds, our doctrines, our denominations, our churches, but it is entirely possible that we fail to see beyond these things and fail to grasp the scale of God’s intention for the world.

Perhaps we need the courage of Abraham.

Perhaps we need to mirror the obedience of Abraham.

Perhaps we need to believe that God calls us to be a blessing to others and venture out beyond the familiar.

I have always been struck by the witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian who was executed by the Nazis in the Flossenbürg concentration camp just a few days before the end of the Second World War. He was only 39 when he was executed.

Bonhoeffer did a kind of Abraham thing – he stepped out of his familiar world in his pursuit of understanding more about God.

This highly educated and cultured German theologian travelled to America as a visiting scholar at Union Theological College. While there he became very disillusioned with both liberal and fundamentalist Christianity.

He spent a great deal of his time in the Harlem area of New York with African American Christians and regularly attended the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. He even taught a Sunday school class in the church, as well as helping out with youth clubs.

It was in this foreign world of Black American Christianity in Harlem in the 1930s that Bonhoeffer became acutely aware of the sin of racism. His willingness to travel beyond the confines of what was familiar and acceptable for a white, academic theologian opened his eyes to a greater vision of

God and how God was to be found in the midst of life and not within the structures of religion and theology.

Bonhoeffer's time in Harlem had a profound effect upon him. It helped him to think differently about and reject what was happening in Germany with the rise of Fascism, the treatment of the Jews and the acceptance of Fascist ideology by many Christians at the time.

It changed his understanding of what it meant to be a person of faith.

Bonhoeffer would come to speak of Jesus as 'the man for others'. He argued that the church was being authentic when it was active in 'the middle of the village' as he put it, not sitting on the edge of society as a bridge between the world and heaven.

In one of Bonhoeffer's letters from prison – the conditions of which were pretty terrible – writing from his prison cell Bonhoeffer says:

God does not repay evil for evil, and thus the righteous should not do so either. No judgment, no abuse, but blessing...Blessing means laying one's hand on someone and saying, Despite everything, you belong to God. This is what we do with the world that inflicts such suffering on us. We do not abandon it; we do not repudiate, despise or condemn it. Instead we call it back to God, we give it hope, we lay our hand on it and say: may God's blessing come upon you, may God renew you; be blessed, world created by God, you who belong to your Creator and Redeemer. We have received God's blessing in happiness and in suffering. Yet those who have been blessed can do nothing but pass on this blessing; indeed, they must be a blessing wherever they are.

Abraham is called to leave the familiar and trust God with the promise of blessing and being a blessing for the nations.

Sadly, those who stand in the line of Abraham, whether by lineage or by faith, too often bless themselves and care little about others.

Jesus comes to break out of the familiar, trusting the Father for the unknown and to be a blessing for the world.

Not surprisingly, Pharisee and disciple alike think in terms of their own people, their own world and struggle with the scope of God's grace and love for the world as a whole.

Christians like Bonhoeffer sometimes travel beyond the familiar and into the world of others and receive a blessing.

People like Bonhoeffer help us understand our calling to be a blessing to others and that true faith is seen at work in the middle of the village, blessing our neighbour, not on the outskirts simply awaiting the glories of heaven.

Lots of us here have left the familiar, have left family, and have resettled here in the Netherlands for all kinds of reasons. We are grateful for this church which is so wonderfully experienced in providing a home and blessing us strangers and nomads.

Let us not lose the sense that in being blessed we are called to bless others in the ordinariness of everyday life with kindness, compassion and friendship.

We are called to bless others by affirming God's love for them and for all – love made known and visible in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

As we reflect on Abram's response to God's call to be a blessing for the nations;

As we hear again Jesus expand Nicodemus' understanding of the extent of God's love for the world;

Let us reflect on the words of Bonhoeffer that: those who have been blessed can do nothing but pass on this blessing; indeed, they must be a blessing, wherever they are.

May God enable us to share in the breadth of his vision for the world – and be a blessing.