

John Docherty, 1 March, 2015

“Beyond Imagination”

In the two passages that were read this morning - the passage from Genesis and the passage from Mark - there is a lot of material to feed into a meditation, and a fair bit of material to allow us to explore the Lenten theme for today's service : Beyond Imagination.

We have these somewhat enigmatic characters of Abram / Abraham, and Sarai / Sarah;

- we have the promises that are offered to this man of faith who seems to have an intimate knowledge of God before almost anyone else;
- promises related to founding a virtual dynasty of leaders, nations, peoples;
- we have the suggestion that his wife of advanced years (in her nineties; Abraham is almost one hundred according to the text) will bear a son;
- we have this changing of names for some reason;

Abraham. He's the patriarch of patriarchs. He's the guy that sets it all in motion, and can arguably be identified as the most important person ever to have walked this earth – at least from a Judeo-Christian point of view.

Without Abraham, we don't have Isaac.

Without Isaac, we don't have Jacob.

Without Jacob, we don't have the twelve tribes of Israel.

Without the twelve tribes we don't have Judaism.

Without Judaism, we don't have Christianity.

Without Christianity, we don't have Mennos.

Now, I recognize that that's a pretty obvious progression, and one that is, to some extent, arbitrary. If we didn't have Abraham, God would surely have sought out someone else, and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would become the God of Mordechai, Ebenezer and Tevye;

or maybe the God of Hamish, Catriona and Angus;

or maybe the God of Yuen, Zude and Guo;

or maybe the God of Andy, Maggie and Liz.

And the result would, conceivably, have been the same, just the names would have changed.

The God of Andy, Maggie and Liz ...

Doesn't seem quite as impressive as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, does it? We are, presumably, talking about the same God and the same message. The only thing that has changed is the choice of messengers.

What would happen if this God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were brought down to earth a little?

What if we didn't change the messengers? What would happen if we only thought a little differently about the messengers? What if we were the heirs, not of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but of the God of Abe, Ike and Jake?

Mind you, I suppose among some of you ethnic Mennos we might have some descendants of Abe, Ike and Jake ...

What if we allowed ourselves to extend our imagining enough to picture these recorded conversations between God and a representative of humanity as not a deep theological exchange with some imposing, larger-than-life historical character by the name of Abraham, but a chat with the plumber from down the street - good old Abe?

But maybe that's a little too irreverent.

What if, instead, the progression of God's conversation with humanity is from a deep theological exchange with an imposing, larger-than-life historical character by the name of Abraham, through a long history of struggles to find a faithful path, through the dust and tension of the Roman occupation of this part of the world, to a chat with the carpenter from down the street - good old Jesus Ben Joseph?

What if the progression of this conversation down the ages is from one with the elevated Patriarch of patriarchs, to this humble "son of man"?

It's an unusual title, this "Son of Man". Most commentators will note that it's an Aramaic term, that *can* be used to simply mean "I", especially in a context of humiliation and danger. It's a bit like putting yourself into the third person and saying something like "yours truly is having a miserable day".

But one of the commentators I read in preparing this meditation shifted the translation a little, I think in the interest of some gender balance, and renamed him the “Son of Humanity”. It’s an interesting shift, and one that stirs *my* imagination, at least. Not so much from the perspective of inclusive language, as from the perspective that it provides a bit of a different angle for understanding what is meant by the term, or for how to hear Jesus in this passage from the Gospel of Mark.

In some ways it’s an awkward passage.

It follows hard on the heels of a few verses in which Jesus is sounding his disciples. He asks them, and you can almost hear the tension in his voice :

“... who do men say that I am? ...” (to which they reply “John the Baptist”, “Elijah”, “one of the prophets”).

But he presses them : “... And *you*, who do *you* say that I am? ...” (to which Peter answers “you are the Messiah”).

It’s a Jesus prodding his disciples to determine just how much they’ve understood. He’s trying to make sure they know what they’re in for, and he’s not subtle about it.

It’s another one of those passages that presents us with a side of Jesus that can be a bit off-putting to some. It’s not the “gentle Jesus, meek and mild” of some Sunday School stories;

it’s not the compassionate, sensitive man asking the Gerasene demoniac “what is your name?”;

it’s not the quiet, reflective man writing in the sand as he’s being asked to give his blessing to the stoning of a woman caught in adultery;

it’s not the likeable, avuncular Jesus inviting the children to be brought to him;

it’s not the humble, broken man being led to his torture and crucifixion.

No, this is a Jesus who seems to be almost at the breaking point. There’s a certain short-temperedness about him at this stage; a certain tension that almost seems to

reflect a level of desperation. “These guys just don’t quite get the full picture! They say they think that I’m the Messiah, but they have no idea what that really means!”

It’s a Jesus barking at the one person who is intimate enough with him to actually dare to rebuke him for suggesting that his ministry will have anything but a glorious completion, the same person who states clearly that he believes Jesus is the promised Messiah. Peter may not be the brightest bulb in the chandelier – we can sort of picture this gruff, hearty fisherman who finds himself getting headaches trying to make sense of all these parables and miracles in an attempt to figure out what Jesus is really all about – but he is clearly, deeply, committed to following this Jesus and doing everything in his power to protect him and defend his honour, a bit like a loveable big golden retriever.

So when Jesus starts making this very direct statement that he must suffer many things, be rejected, then killed, I’m not overly surprised that Peter would take him aside, in a concerned, fatherly kind of way to say “Whoa! Jesus ... easy on there. You’re bringing the troops down a little – we need a pep talk, not images of defeat, suffering and death ...”

The bit about rising again seems to have slipped by unnoticed ... or perhaps noticed, but assumed to be a reference to the resurrection at the end of times.

So Jesus’ rebuke, this emotional, anger filled outburst, “... get behind me Satan! ...” has to cut deep.

And his threat to the gathered crowd – if you’re ashamed of *me*, I’ll be ashamed of *you* – might feel like it has a touch of pettiness about it.

We have him telling his disciples to “take up their cross” and follow him;

we then have him telling this crowd of would-be believers - this group that he’s just told to be prepared to lose their lives on his behalf - we have him then threatening them that if they are ashamed of him and of his words, he will be ashamed of *them* when he comes in power with the angels of God.

It’s harsh, and it’s uncompromising.

And it’s also very human.

This “Son of humanity”, this heir to the promises of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is carrying the full weight of knowledge of what’s to come, and it’s wearing him down; and it almost seems like he’s lashing out at those around him in his distress.

Commentators will tell us that Mark was likely writing to Christians undergoing serious persecution under the Romans, especially in Rome itself following the great fire that destroyed most of the city. His words, then, written a generation after the events of Jesus’ life, are intended to bring encouragement to those whose faith might be faltering in the face of extreme danger.

It may not seem a terribly comforting form of encouragement – ‘take up your cross’, ‘deny yourself’, ‘be prepared to lose your life for the sake of Jesus and the gospel’ – but it’s an attempt to remind them that discipleship is costly (it can cost you your life), and it’s also the only path to redemption and, ultimately, to life.

It’s also, in some ways, a bit of an echo and an upending of the promise made to Abraham. He was told, in a sense, that he would gain the whole world :

he would be fruitful;

he’d be the father of many nations;

he would possess the entire land of Canaan.

And now Jesus asks the heirs apparent of this man of faith “...what will it profit [you] to gain the whole world and forfeit [your] life? ...”

He’s turning things upside down and inside out.

Richard Diebert, in his commentary on Mark, says the following :

“Until now the Christ has disclosed God’s reign in the more visible – and more popular – form of strength and triumph. Following this conversation, the Christ discloses God’s reign in the less visible – and much less popular – form of weakness and defeat. In the end, it will be the *whole* ministry of the Christ that testifies to God’s reign on earth: in might and in weakness, in triumph and in defeat, visible and invisible.”

The challenge for us, then, is to determine what it means for us not to be ashamed of Jesus and his words;

To determine how to hold to an unapologetic embrace of Jesus and his message, while respecting the faith and integrity of those who may not see in Jesus what *we* see;

To learn how to temper the patriarch whose descendants take the land promised by God by force, killing the inhabitants indiscriminately ... to temper this image of single-minded faithfulness with the one provided by the “Son of Humanity”, whose own single-minded faithfulness drives him to allow himself to be taken, tortured, and killed;

And to learn how to let our imagination carry us to places where we can believe that this denying of ourselves is not a denial of our humanity, but a denial of the power of this world and our own foibles to force us into molds that prevent us from being what we were created to be.