

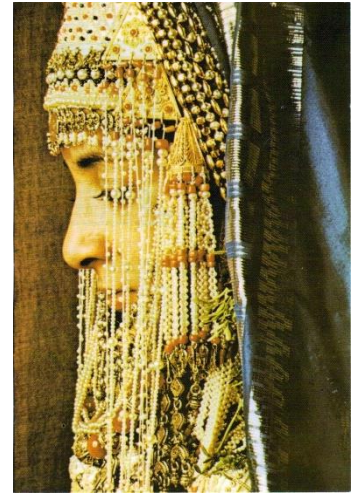
Parish of Central Exeter

Morning Worship and Spiritual Communion
4th Sunday after Trinity 5 July 2020

Finding a partner: second millennium BCE

From the Revd. Charles Edwards

Welcome to my first cyber effort to lead our act of worship. A special welcome to anyone joining us for the first time. Please forgive any of my wonky technology which may come through; I am really a computer dinosaur, and any of my theology which may be edgy for you. Let us rejoice together in the varieties of both, as we celebrate and remind ourselves of the "great cloud of witnesses", in bubbles or alone who are self-isolating, the living and departed who are spiritually with us, as we specially welcome the continuing presence of God in our midst.



The Gathering

Please access https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0CXj02AoqMQ&feature=emb_title for the hymn: 'Lead us heavenly Father lead us'. *This is sung for us at a service in Llanmadoc church, Wales. Llanmadoc is a small village in the Gower peninsula, with a small congregation to match. Yet this is their offering which they share with us all. The words appear on the screen.*

Greeting and Gathering Prayer

The Lord is here; God's Spirit is with us.
Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hid;
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your Holy Name,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.
(from Sarum & Cranmer – especially English and Anglican)

Prayers of Penitence and Praise

Let us open our lives to God, and ask for God's forgiveness and grace.
After each statement, please pause for reflection

On those times when I/we have kept your resurrection as a past event,
rather than a present encounter....

Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy.

On those times when I/we have been blind to your presence....

Christ have mercy, Christ have mercy, Christ have mercy.

On those times when we have failed to live as those who have risen with Christ....

Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy.

To all who turn to Christ, come these comfortable words;
Your sins are forgiven.

*Keep silence and consider this, then think, God has forgiven me, I can forgive myself, and say
Thanks be to God!*

Gloria

Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God's people on earth.
Sovereign God, heavenly Ruler, Almighty God and Father,
We worship you, we give you thanks, we praise you for your glory.
Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father, Lord God, Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world: have mercy on us;
you are seated at the right hand of God: receive our prayer.
For you alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord,
You alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit,
In the glory of God the Father. Amen.

A Collect for Trinity 4

Living presence to Isaac and Rebekah, our ancestors in faith,
Calling us to journey through our deserts to your home,
take the energy of our prayers and deeds,
and transform our homes into places of pilgrimage and peace
for all who arrive there tired and hungry.
We pray this after the pattern of Jesus, and in the power of the Spirit. Amen.
(from Jim Cotter, slightly amended)

Liturgy of the Word

The First and Principal Reading

This is the fifth week of Sunday readings in sequence from the Hebrew Bible (old Testament), rather than our usual jumping about forwards and backwards following ideas from the Gospel Readings. We are moving through the early books of the Pentateuch, the first five books which comprise the Jewish Law (Torah), and whose basic theme is the formation of a nation embarking on a pilgrimage with God in a Covenant of faith, towards the fulfilment of God's promises of land, progeny and a name.

*Other Lectionary readings for this Sunday are:
Matthew 11. 16-19, 25-30 and Romans 7.15-25a*

Genesis 24.34-38, 42-49, 58-67

From the New Jerusalem Bible

(The visitor) said (to Abraham's close relative Laban, brother of Rebekah) "I am Abraham's servant. Yahweh has loaded my master with blessings, and Abraham is now very rich. He has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, men and women slaves, camels and donkeys. Sarah, my master's wife, bore my master a son in his old age, and he has made over all his property to him.

My master made me take this oath, 'you are not to choose a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose country I live. Instead you are to go to my father's home and to my own kinfolk to choose a wife for my son.'

Arriving today at the spring I said 'Yahweh, God of my master Abraham, please grant a successful outcome to the course I propose to take. While I stand by the spring, if a girl comes out to draw water and I say to her "please give me a little water to drink from your pitcher," if she replies "drink by all means, and I will draw water for your camels too." let her be the girl whom Yahweh has decreed for my master's son.

I was still saying this in my mind when Rebekah came out, her pitcher on her shoulder. She came down to the spring and drew water. I said to her, "Please give me a drink". Quickly she lowered her pitcher saying "Drink, and I will water your camels too". I asked her, "Whose daughter are you?". She replied, "I am the daughter of Bethuel, whom Milcah bore to Nabor".

Then I put this ring through her nose and these bracelets on her arms. I bowed down and worshipped Yahweh, and I blessed Yahweh, God of my master Abraham, who had led me by a direct path to choose the daughter of my master's brother for his son.

Now tell me whether you are prepared to show constant and faithful love to my master; if not, say so, and I shall know what to do."

They called Rebekah and asked her, "Will you go with this man?" She replied, "I will." Accordingly they let their sister Rebekah go, with her nurse, and Abraham's servant and his men. They blessed Rebekah and said to her:



C12-13 mosaic, Cathedral of Monreale, Sicily. The Latin text says 'Rebecca gives water to Abraham's servant and his camels'.

Sister of ours, from you may there spring
thousands and tens of thousands!
May your descendants gain possession
of the gates of their enemies!

And forthwith, Rebekah and her maids mounted the camels, and followed the man. The servant took Rebekah and departed.

Isaac meanwhile had come back from the well of Lahai Roi and was living in the Negeb. While Isaac was out walking toward evening in the fields, he looked up and saw camels approaching. And Rebekah looked up and saw Isaac. She jumped down from her camel, and asked the servant, "Who is this man walking through the fields towards us?" The servant replied, "That is my master."

So she took her veil and covered herself up. The servant told Isaac the whole story. Then Isaac took her into his tent. He married Rebekah and made her his wife. And in his love for her, Isaac was consoled for the loss of his mother.

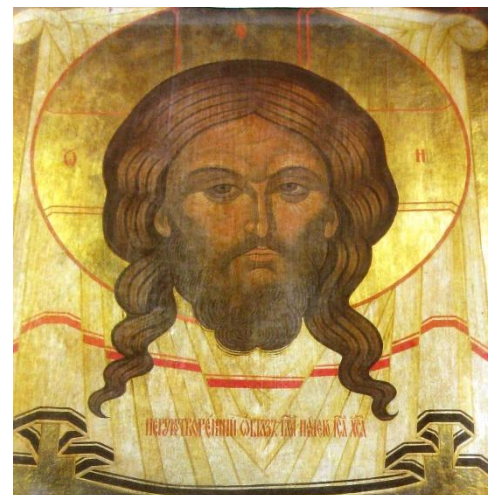
Commentary

In the distant past of the 1960's at theological college we were taught that Abraham was probably the first actual historical person at about 1,800 BCE in that complicated mixture of ancient legend and factual history which is the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible called "The Law" (Torah). But more recent liberal studies have tended to view Abraham not as an individual, rather as an archetypal figure of pastoralist tribal leaders migrating to ancient Canaan from the increasingly urbanised and crowded Fertile Crescent in the early second millennium BCE of modern Iraq.

Remember that there's often more truth and insight in myth than factual history; in tales based on distant folk memories orally conveyed through many generations and enriched by experience, wisdom and new learning. This is because they so often tell us about ourselves.

Such is the value for us of these tales of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses in the Torah, who form part of our Judeo-Christian spiritual cloud of witnesses with us today as we worship. They are not so different from us in their greatness and fallibility, strengths and weaknesses, certainties and doubts.

For instance, at the beginning of the reading Abraham is portrayed as very old and very rich. Many are like that today, some like Abraham faithful to high moral ideals, as we saw last week in the sacrifice of Isaac story.



Abraham. Russian Orthodox Icon, Fifteenth century.

Incidentally, I think it's a reflection of the historical moral progress of the Hebrews in abandoning the current Canaanite practice of child sacrifice to one of their gods, Moloch – a milestone in the history of faith - as part of their maturing concept of God in their slow passage from relatively immoral polytheism (anything goes to please any god) through henotheism – the choice of serving one among many gods (as in the oft recurring Biblical term “The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” – to full monotheism with its much stricter and more humane moral obligations, like the Yahwism of Moses.

Another example of Abraham's integrity is his kindness, honesty, diplomacy and sound business dealings with family and neighbours: with kinsman Lot and priest Melchizedek in Genesis 14, Lot again in Ch. 19, Philistine Abimelech in Ch. 21, the Hittites in Ch. 23 and his concubines' children in Ch. 25.

Also, Abraham realises that his comfortable situation has come through his relationship with a loving and caring God, enabling him to enjoy these constructive and trusting relationships with other people, high and low. Notice also how today's wife-fetching servant seems totally devoted to his master and is also in a co-operative personal covenant relationship with Yahweh.

However, like some of today's political and economic leaders, many ancients were just old and rich!

Today's Genesis passage is part of the Yahwistic sources of the Torah which were first written down in the southern Kingdom of Judah in the tenth century BCE, and belongs to a brief section about Isaac and Rebekah with much less detail about them than there is in the surrounding Abraham and Jacob traditions.

The sociological background to today's story is probably accurate, and it is not rich in concepts of human rights for all, feminist liberty and justice, or appreciation of cultural and ethnic diversity, but we do have here in the picture of Rebekah someone totally secure in her nuclear and extended family, a generous and thoughtful person towards humans and animals, and willing at extremely short notice to leave the care and security she knows, to follow a total stranger – and a male, at that! – and go goodness knows where to marry another stranger.

But when she and Isaac meet – Wow! It's love at first sight! It's “Some Enchanted Evening”, this time “across a crowded camel”! And they can't wait, so in'tent' are they to be together. They seem to marry immediately and live happily ever after, with never or seldom a cross word, even when Rebekah after many frustrated years of childlessness which cannot have improved her temper or self- image, finally and unexpectedly conceives quarrelsome twins, both in the womb and after it, later in this chapter.

We don't hear much more about Rebekah, except in connection with those twins, Esau and Jacob, when the details again start flying fast and furious in later chapters.

There's her connivance with her favourite younger son Jacob to defraud the senior Esau of father Isaac's blessing (Esau had already sold his birthright of inheritance and family

continuity to Jacob – a transaction which for the Yahwist recorder of this incident, identifies Esau with the Edomites, a people sometimes living on land between the Dead Sea and the Red Sea Gulf of Aqaba and often at odds with the southern kingdom of Yahwistic Judah).

Rebekah later persuades Isaac to send Jacob back to her old family home to escape Esau's threatened revenge and find a suitable Hebrew wife – no Hittite or Canaanite bride for her favourite son, Ch.27.46. (Next week, more on Esau and Jacob) After that I could find no mention of Rebekah, not a specific passage of her death.

Isaac is briefly depicted as faithful to Yahweh, honest, diplomatic and of good judgement, in Genesis 27.46 – 28.5, and his death in Genesis 35.27-29.



Rebecca at the Well. An illustration from an early 6th century book known as the Vienna Genesis. The topless female figure left which did not seem to get mentioned in the Bible narrative represents the spirit of the well's source of water. This illustration fuses Romano-Greek (the nymph) and early Christian artistic conventions. Wonderful camels!

Oesterreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna

Profession of Faith, Creed

(We are not alone; we live together in God's world.)

We believe in God, who has created and is creating,
who has come in Jesus to reconcile, and to make all things new.
We trust God, who calls us to be the Church,
to love and serve others, to seek justice and to resist evil;
to proclaim Jesus, born a human, crucified, dead and risen;
our judge and our hope, in life, in death,, and in life beyond death.
God is with us, and we are not alone.
Thanks be to God. Amen.

Intercessions

After this collect there are five suggested topics for your prayers. Look through them, and choose as few or as many as you wish as a focus for your prayers. If it helps, jot some ideas down first. At the end of each set of prayers say: Gracious God, in your mercy, hear my/our prayer.

Eternal God our Maker,
You create us by your power, and redeem us by your love;
As we pray, guide and strengthen us by your Spirit,
that we may give ourselves in love and service, to one another and to you;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen..

Topic 1. Pray about things to be thankful for in the world at large, items from the media or elsewhere that help to bring good effects for all or many.

Topic 2. Pray for international, national and regional leaders and situations, in politics, health, ecology and economics, and others. List at least ten of the world's movers and shakers whose policies and decisions affect many.

Topic 3. Pray for "the whole state of Christ/s Church", universal, ecumenical, Anglican, local, parish, "every member ministry". Use prayer diaries if you have any.

Topic 4. Pray for friends, families, local people situations, issues, lonely, ill, bereaved, troubled and afraid people. When you've run out of others, pray for yourself, putting No. 1 in God's hands.

Topic 5. Keep a longish moment of relaxed silence, and just enjoy God's company.

Finish the Intercessions with the Lord's Prayer, saying first;

Gracious God, in your mercy, hear my/our prayers,
as I/we enfold them all in Christ's loving arms, saying together.....

The Peace

If alone, smile and hug yourself (God does). If otherwise, share the Peace as appropriate.

A short Spiritual Communion

The Book of Common Prayer reminds us that if we offer ourselves in penitence and faith, giving thanks for the redemption won by Christ crucified, we may truly 'eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ', even when we cannot receive the sacrament physically in ourselves.



Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

O God,
help me to trust you,
help me to know that you are with me,
help me to believe that nothing
can separate me from your love
revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

An offertory prayer

We may not be in church, but we can still offer ourselves and our talents to God.

Blessed are you, God and creator of the universe,
as we offer you our activities, thanksgivings and our life.
We present ourselves, and our world, as we are and as you can make us,
for everything in heaven and on earth is yours,
and of your own do we give you. Blessed be God for ever.

As we prepare for communion you might like to access 'Open thou mine eyes and I shall see', by John Rutter, sung here by a choir of Paulist Scholars and Singers of the Chapel Royal. The words appear on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-B-H6Yf8hs>



Because there is no Breaking and Sharing we can have only Spiritual Communion with Christ. I'm sure you can find a way to use a few minutes of silence or conversation to enjoy this, and make it a sacramental moment.

Giving thanks for Christ's death and resurrection you may wish to say

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.
(after the Prayer of St Richard of Chichester)

Post Communion Prayer

Eternal God,
comfort of the afflicted and healer of the broken,
you have fed us at the table of life and hope:
teach us the ways of gentleness and peace,
that all the world may acknowledge
the kingdom of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

Commission Prayer

As we are sent out and given Christ's commission to life and ministry, we pray:
Author of all,
We give you thanks that when we are still far off,
you meet us in your Son, and bring us home.
Dying and living he declares your love, gives us grace,
and opens the gate of glory.
Keep us firm in the hope you set before us,
so we and all your children shall be free,
and the whole earth live to praise your name:
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Closing (Commission) Hymn

Please access the link below for 'Lord of all hopefulness' sung for us by the Choir of St Alban/s Cathedral.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8mti7VL3gg>

Dismissal

We are dismissed by the Christ in the power of the Spirit,
to live and work to God's praise and glory.
So let us live in peace to love and serve the Lord.
In the name of Christ. Amen.

Coffee Break

We invite you to make your own contributions informally to replace the time we usually spend chatting after the service over coffee. This can include prayer, or requests to remember someone or some event. Please email or post material or requests to Keith.

Viv says:

Stephen, chosen to care for the poor, was 'brimming with God's grace and energy and doing wonderful things among the people'. (The Message - Acts 6:8).

Please remember the staff and clients of St Petrock's Homeless Centre. Staff are still working, providing services in and around the City. Especially remembering those who are grieving.

The Bosom of Abraham



'In the Bosom of Abraham.' Attributed to Daniel Chorny a C15 contemporary of Andrei Rublev.

The Bosom of Abraham is regarded in Judaic and hence Christian writing as a place of repose and comfort for those who have died. In Jesus's story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, when the man dies and is in hell, he sees Lazarus in Abraham's bosom.

Abraham is depicted here on the right, with Isaac and Jacob centre and left. He clutches souls against his body and there are many more by his side.

Please scroll down for night prayer

Night Prayer



If you are able to do so, you might wish to light a candle near a window.

Opening Prayers

Ever-present God,
you walk with us
through good times
and bad,
mountain top
and valley deep,
your footsteps our guide,
hands our support.

Ever-present God,
you are close to us
when life is smooth
or rough,
in wholeness
and brokenness,
your healing our hope,
your touch our desire.

Ever-present God,
bring comfort and peace
and the warmth
of your presence
and I shall fear no thing,
for you are with me,
always. *(from faithandworship.com)*

You might like to access below for Simon and Garfunkel's 'Bridge over Troubled Water'. Words appear on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ilm-YTrs4tM>



Bridge over the Atlantic, Isle of Seil, Scotland.

Reading

The New Testament reading appointed for today is below.

Matthew 11 25-30

25 At that time Jesus said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

28 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

(New Revised Standard Version)

Comment

A survey commissioned by Tear Fund in April 2020 indicated that some 24% of all adults in the UK had accessed streamed, videoed, TV or radio church services during lockdown. This compares with 5% attending churches on a normal Sunday. One in five of that 24% said they had never attended a church service before. A lot of these are young people.

So online people who are bearing the burden of all the problems associated with the current emergency are looking to online churches to find rest, peace and support.

As we move away from lockdown, what will happen to these people? The list of precautionary actions that churches have to undertake in reopening creates a burden in itself, apart from any difficulties in travelling from home to a church building. We need not the wisdom of the wise, but the naivety of a child to accept that many, including churchgoers, will say, 'Why should I go to church which is difficult, when I can access it all online which is easy.

If we are seeking to share Christ's promises we cannot do so on our own terms, but engage people where they are, which is increasingly online rather than in a building.

Reflective prayer

On a walk today by the river,
Lord,
I was taken by the gentle
persistence of soft ripples,
guiding the water downstream...

And I wondered...

Were those ripples stirred by a
gentle summer breeze
or quickened by an undercurrent
hidden,
yet at work, beneath the river's
surface,
moving things along, just as you desire?

Most likely, not a case of *either - or*
but rather, Lord, *both - and*...

And so your Spirit moves me:
with soft, persistent ripples, stirring me to life
and rolling deep within me,
'neath my surface tears and smiles,
moving things along, just as you intend...

Bless me, Lord,
with breezes, ripples and undertows,
moving me, pushing me, drawing me downstream
to where the river of my life
meets the ocean of your love,
just as you desire...

Protect me, Lord, on the river's bank,
awake or asleep as I may be
that awake I might keep watch with you
and asleep, rest in your peace...

(Adapted from Concord Pastor)

An evening collect

Lighten our darkness,
Lord, we pray,
and in your great mercy
defend us from all perils and dangers of this night,
for the love of your only Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.



Conclusion and Blessing

Spirit of the living God
present with us now,
enfold us, body, mind and spirit,
and heal us of all that harms us,
in Jesus' name. Amen

The Lord bless us and watch over us;
the Lord make his face shine upon us and be gracious to us;
the Lord look kindly on us and give us peace.
Amen.

As we bring worship to a close you might like to access 'Lord, for the years', sung at the Royal Garrison Church of All Saints, Aldershot. Words appear on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkTrFQLy6js>

Thanks

*Thanks to everyone who has contributed to these services:
Especially to Charles for the morning service, Sheila for choosing the morning hymns, and Viv for coffee break prayers.*

Other material taken or developed from various websites and blogs is normally identified in the text.

