

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 4 MARCH 2012

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Genesis 12: 1-9; Psalm 22:23-31; Mark 8:31-38

“Making Choices”

Today we meet Abram. His name means “exalted father”. It won’t stay that way. In a couple of chapters his name will be Abraham, which means “father of all nations”, but for now it is just Abram, the exalted father of one of the many clans that populated the area that in our times is called “The Middle East”. He lived at a time and in a place where people worshipped many gods, offering them sacrifice in return for good fortune and the warding off of evil.

The bible doesn’t tell us much about Abram’s early life, but the rabbis have some beautiful stories they say were only told by word of mouth, from generation to generation, until the details were finally recorded by the Sages of the Talmud in various Midrashim (or Jewish commentaries).

This is one of them:

Terah, the father of Abram, wasn’t just anybody. He was a servant of the high king and a high priest of the idol worshippers. There was a workshop in Terah’s house, where idols of wood, stone, silver and gold were made and sold.

Although Abram grew up in this environment, he developed his own thoughts and beliefs about these idols. More and more he started to doubt his father’s gods.

Sometimes Terah would leave Abraham to manage the shop. Whenever people came in to buy idols. Then Abraham would say, "How old are you?" The person would say, "Fifty," or "Sixty". Abraham would say, “Don’t you think it’s pathetic that someone of your age would bow down to a one-day-old idol?" They would then feel ashamed and leave.

One time a woman came in with a basket of bread. She said to Abraham, "Take this and offer it to the gods".

Then Abraham got up, took a hammer in his hand, broke all the idols to pieces, and then put the hammer in the hand of the biggest idol among them, which he had left intact.

When his father came back and saw the broken idols, he was appalled. "Who did this?" he cried.

"Oh, I won’t lie lie to you" replied Abraham calmly "It was awful. A woman came with a basket of bread and told me to offer it to them. I brought it in front of them, and each one said, "I'm going to eat first." Then the biggest one got up, took the hammer and broke all the others to pieces."

"What are you trying to tell me?" asked Terach, "Do they have minds?" Abraham said, "Listen to what your own mouth is saying?

They have no power at all! Why worship idols?"
(Midrash Bereishit 38:13)

This convinces Terah that Abram is right and together they decide to leave the city and travel to a

place where they will be able to practise a faith. They travel all the way from Ur to Haran. There they stay, until Terah dies.

It is there the biblical story we read today picks up the thread, and adds a new voice. It tells us Abram hears a voice, a voice that tells him to leave his country, his home, and his family again, and go to a place “of God’s showing”. Abram goes, together with his cousin Lot and his wife Sara and everything he owns. He is a rich man, able to travel at his leisure. The story makes it clear that there is no reason other than his desire to worship this one God to make him travel.

This story, was written down many centuries after Abram was supposed to have lived. The stories about him had turned to myth a long time before then, and they were already regarded very much as what they are now: Stories from a bygone era, useful only to entertain Sunday school children and of no real significance. In some introductions to the scripture this week one of my colleagues judged this story: a story that may be told in Sunday school, but of no real significance for adults coming to worship.

It is at the time of exile that these stories are written down, when the people of Israel have been taken from their country to another place, “beyond the rivers”, expected to start a new life and integrate in the society and culture of their conquerors. By the time they start writing down the stories at least a generation has passed and the memories of what once was home were becoming dim. Many of them were losing faith. They were surrounded by temples and workshops full of idols, worshipped by people for whom these gods seemed to work much better than their own God worked for them. Young people were integrating into the culture around them, brought the idols home, and started to worship them rather than following the faith of the strange, invisible God their ancestors had brought with them.

It is in that environment Jewish parents and priests begin to rediscover and re-tell the old stories they had brought with them. But rather than telling them as innocent Sunday school stories, they start giving them a counter-cultural edge that critiques the gods and the culture encroaching upon them. In Abram’s case: a counter-cultural story about an ancient hero of faith who grew up in the “beyond the rivers” but decides to turn his back on the culture of idolatry there and entrust his life and future to a different God.

A successful businessman with money, camels and large herds of cattle in abundance who chooses to leave the land “beyond the rivers” behind to go look for something else.

Those gods they have around here, they tell each other, and their children, we’ve been there, done that. Way back father Abram already discovered that what they have to offer doesn’t, in the end, cut the mustard. Our forefather Abram discovered God as someone who comes close and is personal. Someone who can’t be “imaged”, because he is bigger than that and deeper.

Can you hear the voices of the young ones, eager to participate in their contemporary culture, leave the old stuff behind and move on? Their arguments? Their reasoning? Their reasonableness? Mum, Dad, sorry, but that old religious stuff from way back when, that’s all old hat now. We are making our way in a different world now, a world ruled by the gods of this place, here, “beyond the rivers” Don’t stay stuck in the old ways, come on, embrace the new!

No argument will help of course. It never does. The success of the new culture, the modern age, speaks for itself. A handful of obstinate individuals keep telling the stories though. Because they can see the wisdom in them, the deep truths, the wonderful promises and feel the liberating dreams and visions they contain. No more, no less. Beautiful stories, fascinating stories, funny stories, counter-

cultural stories.

There once was a man they say, who lived around here. His father's name was Terah. He was well, part of the place, rooted in the culture. Not a newcomer like us, but from a family that had been around for generations. He realised, and this is ages ago, that what is here was not enough for him. So he left. Did he know what it was he was looking for? Probably not at that stage. But it may be that he saw idol worshippers in his father's workshop and realised there had to be more to God than that. So off he went. First off he loses track, gets stuck halfway (in Haran), settles down again, and probably tries to forget his restlessness and be content with what he has.

And then his father dies. A significant loss, a traumatic event, will sometimes do that to you. Make you wonder, stir you up, fill you with longing for something you're not sure what. That's how we humans work and that's how it worked with Abram. His father dies and suddenly there it was, this nudging, this feeling of dissatisfaction.

It was as if he heard a voice I guess. Ever had that experience? That it is as if something is nudging you? Ever felt there had to be more to life? Most of us don't act on those feelings, silence them with rational arguments or get rid of their dissatisfaction by worshipping other priorities than to find, or be with, a God that does more than scratch the surface and provide you with a comfortable life. Abram did act on these feelings, and his story tells us what happens if you do.

Bit by bit it becomes clearer to him what he is looking for. Gradually God reveals more and more of who God is and what God stands for to him. Abram starts to discern a presence beside him, a breath of fresh air that opens his mind and makes his soul sing in a way the old ways had not. He connects, he discovers a power way beyond what the old religion had to offer him. A power and a presence that would come beside him, he could talk to, bare his soul to. A God that would enter his mind and fill his heart with dreams and visions that went way beyond what was sold in his father's shop and worshipped in the temple up the road. He discovers a different God, a mind blowing, reality changing presence who wants more for the world than just success and comfort for those who would bring him a basket filled with bread rolls in the morning and perhaps a goat or a cow in the evening.

Those die hards in exile retell the stories to their children and grandchildren and say to them: Our forefather Abram was part of the lifestyle and culture you see around you, and he decided it wasn't for him because he saw how pathetic and limited it was. He decided to follow this whisper in his heart that told him there was more, and better, and deeper, and further than was offered to him.

And you know what? He found it. And him finding it changed everything. He became a trail blazer, no longer "just" one of the exalted fathers of our family history, but the father of nations of others who, following in his footsteps, discovered the riches of the faith he had discovered, the God he got to know. Through him, and others that followed him, it is that we now know what it is like to journey with that presence and open our heart to that power, and let ourselves be guided by the dreams and visions that power opens up when you let it.

And believe you me, it is something that goes much further and deeper than those idols you have brought home to worship can ever give you.

As I said. I don't think our time is very different. The gods worshipped around us also doing not much more than scratch the surface. A comfortable, respectable, well adjusted, successful life valued far more than a journey freed from the idolatry of the world around us to be wholeheartedly and unreservedly lived in the presence of God.

Abraham's God calls, Abraham's God is pulling at our heart strings, longing to fill our minds and souls with dreams and visions beyond imagining, calling us to follow in faith wherever it will lead us. Even if it is way beyond our comfort zone, or out of where we have been comfortable and feeling safe before. To join at the table and practise another way of being in the world. The way Christ lived amongst us, the way of love and service, of first the other and then us, of giving recklessly and without reserve of ourselves towards the wholeness of all God's people in this world. Amen.