

# St Edmundsbury Cathedral



Boundary-crossing faith

11 06 2023

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Sermon by the Reverend Canon John Parr

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Ibrahim is a 32-year-old Palestinian who is the head gardener at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery in Gaza. A hundred years ago his great-grandfather was appointed to the same job in Beersheba, 70 kilometres from Jerusalem. The work has been in their family ever since, despite their fleeing from Beersheba in the violence that followed the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. Most of the 3691 graves Ibrahim and his colleagues look after are of British servicemen, but people from other Commonwealth and European countries are also buried there. What Ibrahim says about his work reveals his generous vision:

“I learnt from my family to love our work. We feel it’s very important. These people gave their lives for their countries, and we’re trusted to take care of this historic place. It’s important to respect all dead people, whatever their nationalities or the reason they’re here”.

The apostle Paul was interested in another Ibrahim whose story was also associated with generous vision: Abram the herdsman, who heard God’s call and received God’s promise to bless him (Gen 12.1ff). He was told to leave his ancestral home in present-day Iraq, and head for another land. He would become the father of ‘a great nation’ who would extend God’s blessing to ‘all the families of the earth’. Abram set off for Canaan into an unknown future, with his wife Sarai (their names are changed later in the story to Abraham and Sarah), and his nephew Lot, and their servants and flocks.

In his letter to Christians in Rome, Paul sees Abraham’s faith fuelling his journey – faith that enabled him to trust God’s astonishing promise, and receive God’s completely undeserved blessing and live hopefully as he looked to the future, however much he must have wondered what lay in store for him.

The Koran regards Ibrahim of Gaza as a son of Abraham, through the line of Abraham’s other son Ishmael rather than Isaac. I’m struck by the parallels between Ibrahim and Abraham. Ibrahim sees his work as a sacred trust and a blessing that he has received, rather than something he’s entitled to. He too must wonder what the future holds for him and his family, in view of the escalating violence in Gaza and the West Bank. Will his children inherit

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his blessing? What comes across in his story is the way he lives on the boundaries of life and death, treasuring what has been entrusted to him, and looking to the future with enough hope for him and his family to remain in Gaza.

Paul is particularly interested in the story of Abraham because he sees his faith as a force for unifying Jews and gentiles who are at odds with each other in the multi-cultural church in Rome. Paul fastens onto Abraham's willingness to trust God's gracious promise to bless him and his descendents. In Paul's eyes, his ethnic identity – and that of his Jewish descendents – counts for nothing compared to his faith in the astonishing promises of God. It was his faith that channelled God's blessing – blessing that extended to his descendents in faith. Paul uses the story of Abraham's boundary-crossing faith to call members of the church in Rome – gentiles and Jews alike – to reproduce its pattern, of *trust* in God's promise, *openness* to receive God's blessing, *hope* in God's future.

Today's gospel reading from St Matthew (Matt 9.9-13, 18-26) brings us to another son of Abraham, *the son of Abraham* in this gospel (Matt 1.1). When we read the accounts of Abraham in Genesis and Romans alongside today's gospel, we can see how Jesus' faith echoes that of his esteemed ancestor. Matthew's two stories are held together by a common theme: Jesus fulfils his vocation as the son of Abraham through boundary-crossing faith.

The stories are familiar enough. In the first Jesus is among 'tax collectors and sinners', people kept at arm's length by the more respectable members of the Jewish community. Tax collectors worked for the Roman occupation. Some of them had a reputation for dishonesty. Sinners weren't particularly scrupulous about obeying the Law of Moses. And yet Jesus is at home with these marginal people.

He justifies his willingness to eat with them by referring his critics to some words from the prophet Hosea, at the end of today's OT reading: "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice' (Hosea 6.6). For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners". It's not that Jesus rejects religious practice. But he insists that spiritual scruples shouldn't get in the way of Israel's primary call to live by 'steadfast love'. The faith of *the son*

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of Abraham is fuelled by boundary-crossing mercy that channels God's blessing into healing divided communities.

In Matthew's second story, Jesus stands on the boundary between life and death, like Ibrahim in Gaza tending graves in the face of escalating violence. A synagogue leader, named Jairus in Mark and Luke, approaches him and asks him to come and lay hands on his daughter. He believes that she's dead. He hopes that Jesus will enable her to live again.

But just as he's setting off for the man's house, Jesus is delayed by a woman suffering from chronic hemorrhages. She would have lived in isolation during the twelve years of her debilitating illness. She comes up behind him and touches his cloak in desperation. Jesus sees her touch as an act of boundary-crossing faith that channels God's gracious blessing into healing her relationships with her community, as well as her body. He speaks to her with such tenderness: "daughter, your faith has made you well" (Matt 9.22).

Meanwhile people are mourning for the leader's daughter. When Jesus arrives at the house with her father, he wants none of it: "she's not dead, but sleeping" (Matt 9.24). This time it's the faith expressed by *his* touch that crosses boundaries, as it channels God's gracious blessing into restoring the girl's life.

Boundary-crossing faith, in Ibrahim and Abraham, in Abraham and Jesus, in an anxious father and a desperate woman. What does this kind of faith look like today?

A year ago Frances and I went to Palestine with the Amos Trust, a small Christian-based human rights organisation. Our party visited a number of projects on the West Bank. One of the most impressive was the Tent of Nations, which is run by a Palestinian Christian family, the Nassars, from their hilltop farm 9 kilometres from Bethlehem. The farm is also a centre for reconciliation and non-violent resistance.

The Nassars have been subjected to violence and intimidation for years. Last year their newly-planted olive trees were destroyed yet again by Israeli settlers. The family worry about being cut off from Bethlehem by the extension of the Israeli separation wall. But they're determined to stay on their farm. "The land is like our mother", they told us. "We

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care for her. We won't leave her or sell her. We refuse to be anyone's enemies". The Tent of Nations lives by gracious, boundary-crossing faith, practising steadfast love and mercy as it builds bridges between land and people, Palestinians and Israelis.

Last year the Amos Trust's Christmas Appeal supported the breast cancer screening programme of the Al Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza City, one of the most dangerous and impoverished places in the world to live. The hospital is run by the Episcopal Church of Jerusalem. Women in Gaza are three times more likely to die from breast cancer than in the UK. Al Ahli Hospital lives by gracious, boundary-crossing faith. Impoverished Gazans know that it offers compassionate care irrespective of religion, ethnicity or ability to pay. Its director tells of a mother who came to Ahli with her child: 'We are here because you are Christians. We know we won't be neglected here'.

Boundary-crossing faith, in the Nassar family's Tent of Nations near Bethlehem, in the Al Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza City and the woman who brought her daughter there.

I wonder if Ibrahim of Gaza would see Jesus the son of Abraham as his brother in compassionate, boundary-crossing faith. I wonder too how much we see Jesus as our brother in this faith, as those who inherit God's promises to Abraham, and live by his faith in the God who gives life to the dead (Rom 4.17), God whose blessing knows no bounds – for which we offer our heartfelt thanks and praise. Amen.