

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



TRINITY 8

10 AUGUST 2025

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Sermon by the Venerable Vanessa Herrick

Genesis 15.1-6

“Look towards heaven and count the stars....” (Gen. 15.5)

Ten days ago, I was listening to the Today Programme on Radio 4 when it was announced that Professor Michelle Dougherty is to become the new Astronomer Royal. The first woman to hold the post in its 350-year history, Michelle was asked what it was that set her on the road to this prestigious title and role. She explained that her journey began at the age of 10 when her father and sister built a telescope and invited her to look through it. “That was when I got my first view of Jupiter and four large moons....” she said. In that moment, as an ordinary child, she had discovered something wonderful, extraordinary – beyond her imagining; and – though she didn’t know it then - it was to shape the rest of her life. Childlike wonder opened up for her possibilities she didn’t know existed.

“Look towards heaven and count the stars....”

When, in a vision, God said these words to Abram, it changed his life too. When we meet him in this morning’s reading, Abram’s getting jittery. He’s asking questions. He wants proof. He just can’t see how God can fulfil his promises for the future, when – in the present - he still has no children of his own, or land of his own.

But God tells him to have courage and trust in his promises. God ‘brings him outside’ of his tent and says, “Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them....So shall your descendants be.” And Abram looks up to the night sky in childlike wonder and says, “I believe.” It was a hugely significant moment. The profoundly understandable, but continual litany of ‘objections’ to what God has said are silenced by the awe and wonder and beauty of looking at the stars of heaven. Disbelief and creeping cynicism are wiped out in the revelation of God’s greatness. Trust is renewed and the impossible becomes possible – against all the odds.

One of the sad truths of growing older is that we lose our ability to wonder. Compare the excitement of a toddler chasing after bubbles; or the intensity of a young child listening to a good bedtime story; or the fascination of a ten-year-old as they learn basic science with your best saucepans and utensils in the kitchen. I can still remember my first visit to the London Planetarium, sitting open-mouthed as the stars and the planets and the comets were unveiled to me in the ‘dome of the night-sky’.

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But as we become adults, knowledge can replace wonder and discovery; experience mars innocence; trust is eroded by cynicism. And we no longer 'simply believe'.... Of course, there is wisdom in such things. And as parents and grandparents, we rightly spend much of a child's early years teaching and guiding them so that they don't come to harm. But as I suspect we all know, something gets lost on the way. We wonder less; and we worry more. And the same can sometimes be said of our faith..... I dare to think that that was something of what was happening to Abram. Logically, realistically, humanly-speaking there was no way he and Sarai were going to have children. So why did God keep on promising that they would? Just to tease him? Just to taunt him? Just to test him? Abram repeatedly asks God how it could be possible?.....

But rather than answer his questions directly, God invites him to come outside and "Look towards heaven and count the stars...."

And somehow, in that moment, doubt and questioning is replaced with wonder. For, this encounter with the immensity of the God who created the heavens and the earth, leads Abram – in spite of it all – to simply believe. We read, Abram "*believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.*" (Gen 15.6).

Last Sunday, we celebrated the Feast of the Transfiguration, and Dean Joe encouraged us to believe that 'the light gets through the cracks'; that even in the most appalling situations in our world – in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan and South Sudan; even in the most appalling personal loss and tragedy; even in those seemingly impossible moments of darkness, the light of the transfigured Christ - who knew suffering and glory in equal measure – will shine through; will bring strength and healing in our weakness; will bring the power of the resurrection to bear on broken hopes and broken lives in our broken world.

God can make the impossible possible.

Just as he did for Abram.

And he can do so for us too.

The invitation to us today is to emerge from our tents of doom, and to come outside and look at the stars. To put away our despair and our doubts. To turn again to the Creator of this beautiful and amazing world and say simply, with Abram, and with that same childlike wonder which we lose so easily and yet need so deeply: 'I believe'.

Humanly-speaking, I can't see how it can happen, yet I believe.

I can't see how there can be a ceasefire in the Middle East; yet I believe.

I can't see how the conflict between Russia and Ukraine can come to a peaceful end; yet I believe.

I can't see how the Church can grow and find its place in the life of the Nation again; yet I believe.

I can't see how God can be interested in me and my own little world; yet I believe.

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I'm not, of course, calling for naivety. But I am challenging you – and myself – to pray for grace to recover the wonder. To lay aside the worry. To actively seek, to actively desire that simple, childlike faith which Abram showed, and which Jesus himself points to in his teaching when he says: *“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”* (Matt. 18.3)

So, what can we do to make that possible?

Well, the first, and obvious, thing is to pray – to ask God to give us again the gift of childlike wonder. But there are other things we can do which may open our eyes and (as Joe encouraged us last week) let the light in through the cracks.

We could go for a walk, or sit in the garden, or look at a vase of flowers and deliberately contemplate nature: As the well-known hymn puts it:

*Oh Lord, my God
When I, in awesome wonder
Consider all the worlds thy hand has made
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder
They power throughout the universe displayed.
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee
How great thou art, how great thou art....”*

Or we could keep a diary of thanksgiving for a week and consciously express our gratitude for the tiniest and the greatest gifts we receive each day.

Or we could take some time in silence each day, to dream dreams – to offer our worries and our desires to God – and even though, humanly-speaking, it all may seem impossible, just tell him. Give him your trust. And say, like Abram, ‘I believe’.

Of course, we may never see the full outcome of our prayers, our wonderings or our imaginings. Father Abraham, did indeed, have many ‘sons’, and yet, his was not a straightforward journey. But it was that moment of childlike wonder when God took him out of the tent of worry and said, *“Look towards heaven and count the stars....”* that completely changed his perspective and set him on the path to become the father of many nations.

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May we, like Abraham, learn again to “*Look towards heaven and count the stars....*”; may we recover something of our childlike wonder; and may we sing with countless others of his children:

“Finish, then, thy new creation,
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see thy great salvation
Perfectly restored in thee;
Changed from glory into glory
Till in Heav’n we take our place,
Til we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love and praise.”
Amen.