

Paradise Postponed!

Well, the holiday season is upon us. For many people that means long journeys to exotic, or at least different, places. And so for many parents, it means the daunting task of inventing effective and encouraging answers to that dreaded question from the back seat of the car: “Are we nearly there yet?” I realise now that my parents became masters of the art of putting off this dreaded question as we drove up the country on our summer holidays, starting off yet another game of ‘I spy’ or ‘twenty questions’ at the first sign of rebellion. (Perhaps you found similar strategies).

But the Breakfast programme on BBC 1 yesterday had a report on parents who were not so successful. The report was about the tensions that can arise between passengers on airplanes when parents take their lively young children on long-haul flights. You can imagine the scenes I am sure, and the plaintive pleas of the parents: “Jack, please stop kicking the seat in front, especially now the woman sitting in it has just picked up her polystyrene cup full of hot coffee!” “Please stop shouting ‘I want to go home’ over and over again – that man is looking daggers at you over the top of his briefcase!” “And please keep your seatbelt on, the plane is just about to take off!”

All three of our bible readings today are responses to that dreaded question – “are we nearly there yet” – responses given at times when God’s children are getting restless and starting to fumble at the clasp of their spiritual seatbelt. Abram (later to become Abraham) is not getting any younger – to put it mildly! He was 75 years old when God promised he would be father to a whole nation of descendents. Several years and a long, eventful journey later, Abram’s trust in God’s promise is starting to waver. The first followers of Jesus were all fired up with the promise of Jesus’ triumphant return from heaven, to set things straight in the world and prove their trust was well placed. Decades later, Luke was having to encourage a community still waiting to play a proverbial game of ‘I spy’ with their future. “Keeping watching,” Luke says, for something beginning with “M.” But perhaps by now they can’t help wondering – is that ‘Messiah’ or ‘Mug’? The writer to the Hebrews is really having to work hard to keep his believers on board. His audience was a group who had converted to Christianity from Judaism. But instead of the promised return of Jesus they had expected, they were experiencing persecution from the Romans and humiliation from fellow Jews. Rejected from the synagogues of most Jews for believing Jesus was the fulfilment of the Old Testament hopes, the Hebrew Christians were on the point of giving up on Jesus and returning, chastened, to orthodox Judaism.

You see, although they lived at times and in different places, these characters all faced the same basic problem: God had promised them something wonderful: Descendents for Abram; Christ’s rule over all for the Christians. But the reality they faced in the present was so completely different to the reality God had promised. Abram’s wife Sarah is an elderly woman and *still* childless. Years of scorn and suffering roll on for Jesus’ followers, and *still* there is no sign of the promised end. Their hope was turning into doubt-full questions: “Are we *really* nearly there yet?” Or was the promise just a pipedream?

If Christians today have inherited God's promise – the same promise of a bright future given in different forms to God's people down the centuries, then perhaps it is no surprise that we have also inherited the same problem: The times we live in make that promise seem remote and unlikely. We look for signs of God's healing love breaking into the world and we find aid workers committed to using their medical skills for those in desperate need murdered in Afghanistan. We look for signs of resurrection life springing up in our world and we find millions of lives devastated by flooding in Pakistan, their homes, families and communities (all the things that make life flourish) literally swamped by this relentless force of nature. And all this as people in Japan are remembering and mourning that modern icon of mass destruction - the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. We seek God's promised justice in our lives, thinking ourselves secure from the havoc abroad, and we find the jobs for which we trained taken away from us, the pensions to which we diligently contributed threatened, and the services for which we paid taxes all our lives having to be drastically cut back as we reach old age. In the face of all this suffering and angst, the God who announces himself to Abram saying "Fear not, I am your shield," seems confined to our dreams. The God who, in Jesus, promised that "I will be with you always, I am saving the world, I am coming back" seems to have been held up indefinitely. Aren't we nearly there yet? But you promised ...!

So what made Abram believe the incredible once more? How did he rediscover faith in a promise which, in the light of his wife's age and barrenness, seemed completely out of the question? One thing we should notice straight away is that Abram's faith was *not* restored by a sudden miraculous feat of infertility treatment by God, there and then. That promise of descendents would come true, but not yet. For now, Abram had to continue to rely on the sheer impossible possibility of God's promise: "your son *will* be your heir." Notice also that with the promise comes a sign – but not a new sign. Here, there is nothing like the Red Sea parting or Manna falling from heaven like we hear of in Exodus. This is a sign that has actually been with Abraham all along – all he had ever needed to do was step out of his tent and look upwards to see it. God says "just look at the stars, more stars than you can count. I made them just as I will make your descendents numerous. Just remember who you're dealing with."

Centuries later, Abraham himself will become one of those permanent signs of the impossible possibilities that God has promised. The writer to the Hebrews plays up Abraham as a shining example to be followed – Not because of what he had done to make the future possible, but more precisely because of what he kept on believing *could* be done and *was being* done by God despite what things looked like on the surface. Abraham was someone whom, we are told "died in faith without *receiving* the promises, but from a distance saw and greeted them." In other words Abraham learned to live with the promise as just that, a promise. In his mind's eye he could see something of God's plans for the future – "from a distance" because he held on to what "having faith" *really* means. Abram managed to do what Jesus was encouraging his disciples to do in Luke's gospel: He managed to keep watching.

The real meaning of faith is not the creeds we recite or even the stories we tell. These things are valuable because they help us to express what we believe. The real meaning of faith is simply going on believing that *God* is faithful, in spite of the trouble we see or experience in our lives.

Abram, Luke's community, and the Hebrew followers of Jesus all found this tough. They were no less human than we were. It was not some heroic stubbornness in their character that kept them faithful, but the God who, though often hidden, never stops work within our lives and the lives of others. And when we go restless and start protesting, as countless faithful people have done before us, this God does not dish out endless treats to keep us obedient. God is not like an embarrassed parent, indulging every demand to keep us smiling and stop the other passengers complaining. But what we can get is the occasional reassuring reminder, maybe no more than a whisper, which says "just remember *who* made those promises," "just remember how the story took shape *even though* the characters involved often did not live to see it."

In 'Disclosure,' a poem from her collection called *Watching for the Kingfisher*, Ann Lewin captures quite beautifully what these scriptural writers say about faith:

*Prayer is like watching for the
Kingfisher. All you can do is
Be where he is likely to appear, and
Wait.
Often, nothing much happens;
There is space, silence and
Expectancy.
No visible sign, only the
Knowledge that he's been there,
And may come again.
Seeing or not seeing cease to matter,
You have been prepared.
But sometimes, when you've almost
Ceased expecting it,
A flash of brightness
Gives encouragement.*

Part of what makes the poem ring true, I think, is what the author says about what inspired her to write it. You might think it was a golden memorable moment when she heard a flutter of wings, turned and there it was – a vivid flash of kingfisher blue and orange. But in fact, Ann Lewin tells us in the preface that it was the experience of *not* seeing the Kingfisher which opened her eyes to the truth about faith and prayer. She says, "everyone else in the house where I was staying as a guest saw it, but I, the self-confessed birdwatcher, did not. It was frustrating to say the least!"

It is frustrating, to say the least, to hold on to the belief that God is faithful to God's promise - changing the world into the kingdom of heaven - when what is happening around us seems to conspire against that possibility. It is frustrating, to say the least, to act out that faith with our time, money and commitment, when the world's suffering remains a compelling reason for Christian faith to be kept on the margins, when it is largely seen as a foolish dream that comforts people who are well-meaning but simple-minded. But with God's help, keeping faith is the frustrating task to which we are called.

It is not our task to make the future turn out right. It is our task to believe that God has already guaranteed the future *will* turn out right, and graciously gives us space and time to show by what we say and do what the true colours of that future are like. We may not see the promise fulfilled in our lifetime. But if we let our lives be shaped by the faith that God is faithful, our lives can become signs of God's faithfulness for generations to come, just as Abraham's life became a sign for the Hebrew followers of Jesus. As we watch closely, we might glimpse one or two flashes of kingdom colour ourselves along the way!

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8 August 2010