**Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67 4th Sunday after Trinity 5th July 2020**

Today’s passage is probably one of the loveliest in the whole of the Old Testament. We have romance and love, loyalty and perseverance, and even a long quest. All the elements you would expect in an epic tale on a grand canvas.

It is the story of how Rebekah & Isaac came to be married. It is a tale of its time and customs, but still captures our imagination. The purpose of its telling is not to give us a romantic tale, but to help the reader how understand important it is for us to be faithful to God’s promises.

The events are recorded in Genesis, chapter 24. Although, the lectionary reading gives selected highlights, I encourage you to read the whole of chapter 24 to get the full wonder and glory of the passage. You may even want to pause here to go and read it now.

To help us understand the context, let’s think about what has already taken place.

In Genesis chapter 12, Abraham heard and responded to God’s call for him to travel from Haran, roughly at today’s Syrian/Turkish border, and go 550 miles south to Canaan, a land promised by God to Abraham’s descendants. After making the journey by a very roundabout route and settling in Canaan for many years, Abraham and Sarah, his wife, were then about 100 years old when the Lord blessed them with a son, Isaac.

The Lord then tested Abraham’s faith on a mountain top, by asking him to sacrifice Isaac, his precious son, as a burnt offering. Abraham faithfully obeyed, trusting that somehow the Lord would provide the sacrifice, and at the very last moment, the Lord stopped Abraham and supplied a ram in Isaac’s place.

A while later, Abraham learns that his brother Nahor, who is still living in the North now has grandchildren, one of whom is called Rebekah. And here we catch up with our passage where Abraham charges his most trusted servant to travel north and find a suitable bride for his son.

The servant is unsure that he will be able to do what Abraham asks, but is reassured when told that the Lord will send a heavenly messenger, an angel, before him to prepare the way. So, the servant heads off on the 550 mile journey to Haran with some men, gifts of jewels and fine clothes, all loaded on 10 camels. The journey would have taken the best part of a month to complete and he finally comes to a watering hole just outside the city, at the time when the women would go out to draw water.

The servant now prays to the Lord for help:

“O Lord, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. **13**Behold, I am standing by the spring of water, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water. **14**Let the young woman to whom I shall say, ‘Please let down your jar that I may drink’, and who shall say, ‘Drink, and I will water your camels’—let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master.”

**15**Before he had finished speaking, behold, Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, came out with her water jar on her shoulder. **16**The young woman was very attractive in appearance, a maiden whom no man had known.

As she does just as he had asked in prayer, and is also a from the right family, he knows that this young woman is the one appointed by the Lord to be Isaac’s wife.

When he is before Rebekah’s family, the servant explains it all to them; how Abraham had sent him to find a suitable bride for Isaac, how he had prayed for specific things and how they were all fulfilled, and that the God of Abraham, had led him “by the right way” to Rebekah.

Her brother and father recognise the Lord’s work in all this and agree to her going, and on consulting with Rebekah, she decisively agrees to go the very next day. Since the Lord has called her, she must go without delay. And the family pray a prayer of blessing over her that echoes God’s extraordinary promise to Abraham that his descendants shall be as numerous as the stars, for they pray: “Our sister, may you become thousands of ten thousands”.

The final scenes of our love story conclude with Isaac meditating in a field, and looking up he sees Rebekah arriving on a camel in the distance. She immediately prepares herself by putting on a veil as a bride would do, they marry, and we are told that Isaac loved her. The lord’s provision is bountiful.

That is the summary of events, and we find that from the moment that Abraham commissions his servant, we see his actions are based in his trust in the Lord’s promises. He remembers God’s promises to him and he knows that they are in the process of being fulfilled. So, Abraham assures his servant that the Lord will send his angel before him, preparing the way, to ensure that all would be completed and as the Lord has promised.

The servant also recognises the Lord’s guidance when he saw how it all unfolded. And Rebekah’s brother and father could also see the Lord’s hand at work.

And so, the story helps us to learn how we are to act when God has promised to do something for us. We are to pray and act and trust the Lord’s provision for us.

Abraham had learnt to look for the fulfilment of God’s covenant promises of descendants and land and that they would be a blessing to the nations. The promises of God to us are an extension of those promises. When we are part of the Lord’s family, He promises that it is for eternity and death can never separate us from being in His family. He promises that all Christians have His Holy Spirit in them, and that His love and grace surround and encompass and dwell in us at all times. He promises that He hears our prayer requests and responds. He promises that we are eternally forgiven and can know His joy in each and every moment of our lives forever, no matter what we are experiencing in the present moment.

Again, the passage helps us to think about how we act in the light of God’s promises and I am just going to draw out two of them here:

**God’s promises lead to prayer (v12-14)**

The servant could have simply said to himself, ‘My master Abraham has sent me on this errand, so I will just do as I am told and not bother with prayer. What will be will be.”

We can find ourselves not praying earnestly and expectantly about things because we don’t think that God listens to us, or wants to hear us, or that God will do His ‘thing’ regardless of what we pray. We can take to heart the terrible phrase used to describe Christians as “God botherers”. We may pray because that’s what Christians do, but we don’t expect the Lord to act on anything we ask for because we are so insignificant. Or we could even find ourselves leaning towards fatalism, where we and God have no influence on what will happen.

But the passage shows that these ways of understanding prayer are wrong. The servant prayed BECAUSE he trusted in the solid promises from God. Rather than God’s promises giving us an excuse to neglect prayer, it is what fuelled his prayer, and it’s what is to motivate us to get back on our knees.

Martin Luther said: “Prayer is not overcoming God’s reluctance, but laying hold of his willingness”.

It gives us a wonderful perspective on how we pray to our loving, heavenly Father and seek the guidance of God, the Holy Spirit in us. There is a deep truth in Luther’s statement. The Lord hears us because He values us, created in His image. We are not insignificant, but each of us are of infinite value.

**God’s promises lead to obedient action (v15-33)**

Abraham understands the need for action and although, he is too old to complete the long journey to the north, he arranged for his trusted servant to go on his behalf. Similarly, the servant does not just remain at home waiting for Rebekah to come to him, but actively goes to find a wife for Isaac.

We are often called to be part of the solution to our prayers, to act and be wise, like the servant. We are to listen and watch for the Lord’s response to our prayers so that we may recognise His answer when He does. The answer may look differently to what you expect, but ask for wisdom and look for the Lord’s response.

Some people keep a prayer diary and they note each major prayer as it is asked and note when it is answered. It can be a powerful incentive to pray, but we must also remember that the Lord’s timing is often not in line with our expectations.

The story powerfully demonstrates how trusting in the Lord’s promises, leads to a more active and expectant prayer life, and also, to a more active living out of our faith, rather than a passiveness in our behaviour. Our loving, Heavenly Father, wants to hear us and act for us, and we also have a privileged and active part to play in the working out of the Lord’s plans.

The generous blessings that come through living this way are “far more abundant than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever, Amen.” (Eph 3:20,21)