



22 JULY 07



Bible notes

There are depths to the activity of God and the life of faith that can only be explored when we move away from the conventional and familiar. Abraham receives the unexpected hospitality of God. Jesus challenges the role of women in his society. Paul invites the Colossians into new ways of exploring Christ.

The Old Testament

Genesis 18.1-10a

(focus for both magazines)

This passage is linked to Genesis 13. The material in between takes us into other areas of divine working, revealing how God's providence works within the complexities of human experience. The story of Abraham to this point reveals the struggle he has lived with in order to fulfil the promise of his calling (12.1-3). Now there is a dramatic change. It begins with the rather convoluted arrival of three men – or were they angels or the presence of God (v. 3)? This emphasises the way in which God's purpose for Abraham has become embroiled in the ambiguities of his life. It is not clear what is happening. This is an epiphany. It might even be a revelation of God. It is difficult to really see this as a depiction of the Trinity despite the popular use of the Rublev icon which depicts this encounter as just such a revelation. In fact the point of the encounter was more to do with what would happen to Sarah than about the nature of God. Here the men are not described as angels. They are indeed messengers of God but there is no suggestion they are celestial beings. Abraham offers characteristic desert hospitality but it seems over-generous in the circumstances. Some suggest this is because he is at last taking his responsibility to be a blessing to the world, come who may, seriously. Perhaps it simply fanfares the importance of what is about to be announced. As the story begins to focus on Sarah, Abraham becomes more marginal. The barrenness of Sarah (Genesis 11 onwards) and the work of God 'returning in due season' is



now what is important. We are left wondering what her response will be. She simply listens. As a woman she is not allowed beyond the entrance when men are in conversation but her circumstances are about to take an important turn. Her significance for the work of God will change for ever.

Psalm 15

The psalm begins with the question of a prospective worshipper who comes to the Temple (tent). What makes a person suitable to enter? The custodian of the place of worship gives clear instructions (vv. 2-5). It is a person who lives consistent with the teaching of the Law. They have a life of moral correctness, do not wrong their Israelite neighbours, despise evil-doers, honour those with similar values, charge no 'interest' on loans and accept no bribes. Such moral correctness would provide a life of stability but did anyone qualify? Such respect for the sanctity of holy space may draw a line in the sand but seems to lack the transforming touch of God's steadfast love.

The Epistle Colossians 1.15-28

Paul sets his reflection on the cosmic Christ in the life of the Church and the death of Jesus on the cross. It is thought that he is using an early hymn offering a cascade of ideas and themes to emphasise the lordship of Christ: Christ is how we see God (image); heavenly beings (thrones and powers) were created through him. This was his position before time began and he is still the cohesive power in the universe (v. 17). Then coming down to earth we are moved to

consider the nature of the Church as his body (v. 18). He is the 'the beginning' of this new humanity reconciled to God by God through death on the cross. An event in history that restores the eternal order through resurrection and ascension. Verse 19 needs to be linked to verse 21 and onwards. The fullness of God which the Colossians sought in sources other than Christ can be found in him through morally transformed lives, afflictions that extend the reach of Christ's suffering love, exploration of the mind-stretching implications that make Christ the hope of glory for all resulting in a mature human nature. 'The glory of God is a human being fully alive' (Irenaeus, c.130-200).

The Gospel Luke 10.38-42

In the story of Martha, Luke introduces someone who has lost a sense of proportion. The contrast between the two sisters is not between service and listening but between the attentiveness of the disciple and the anxious uproar of someone who is missing the opportunity of the moment. What was so necessary that Martha's desire to offer hospitality missed it? This must be about more than the actual event. Jesus was not simply saying he wasn't hungry! He was certainly offering support for Mary who was giving him single-minded, attentive, unqualified discipleship. Martha, by contrast, was ignoring all that he was offering her: the opportunity to step out of her role as a woman, dictated by culture and religion, and become a disciple. Jesus came as the one whose kingdom broke through convention and inherited piety. In last week's Gospel reading, a Samaritan – an apostate Jew – practised the love of neighbour. In this encounter, a woman listened as though she were a rabbi's disciple and was praised, not chastised, for going beyond her station in life (cf Romans 14.17).

These same Bible passages were covered in Roots Issue 12 (July/August 2004). Some of the material produced around the Gospel passage may be found on the website www.rootsontheweb.com under the date: 18 July 2004.



Set the scene

If you have a flexible worship area, set it out in café style – several small tables, each with an attractive cloth, a tea light-type candle (high street shops sell cheap containers to make tea lights safe) and a small basket of goodies such as satsumas and wrapped sweets.

If your building is more traditional, make up some little 'token' bags so that as people arrive they receive the items that are on the tables above – one bag per family or row of seats. (Small squares of cloth, cut with pinking shears and caught up with an elastic band, are fine.)

Have some gentle music playing – some worship songs or the organist playing quietly.

Call to worship

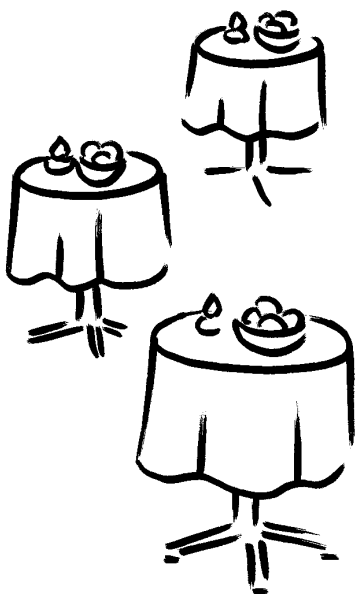
Based on Psalm 15

Lord, who may dwell in your tabernacle?
Whoever leads a blameless life and does what is right.

Who may abide upon your holy hill?
Whoever speaks the truth from their heart.

Let us worship God in Spirit and in truth.
Let us worship God together; Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

An alternative Call to worship is available on the website, www.rootsontheweb.com.



Pray

A prayer of approach

God of the desert spaces,
where water is sparse and life is hard,
we come to you.

Lord of the cosmic universe,
where sound is silent and light unseen,
we come to you.

God of the street and town,
where people pass without a glance,
we worship you.

God of the country,
where rippling streams sing your praise,
we worship you.

God of this place,
God of this congregation,
God of my heart,
I worship you.

We come with all that we are.
Take us, mould us, accept us,
and change our lives forever.

Amen.

A prayer of confession

Based on Psalm 15

Read verses 1 and 2

In a moment of quiet, we reflect on the last week.

We think of the things of which we are ashamed:

when we did not speak the truth,
when our hearts and our tongues were separated,
when our hearts said 'no' but our tongues said 'yes'.

And we are sorry.

Read verse 3

We think of the things of which we are ashamed:
when others needed our love and we refused,
when we held others in contempt,
when we put others down by word or deed.

And we are sorry.

Read verse 5a

We think of the things of which we are ashamed:
When we did not challenge the greed of the world,
When we went along with corruption and dishonesty,
When we did not honour our Christian life.

And we are sorry.

Read verses 4 and 5b

May your transforming love be ever at

work in our lives;
may your Spirit be ever more present in our hearts;
may your grace run through our veins;
that we might become more and more like you, every day.

Amen.

A prayer of intercession

God of the field and river,
of the desert and oasis,
of the plain and steppe,
of the town and city:

Lord of all,

we ask your blessing.

For people who are waiting for food,
for people who are waiting for water,
for people who are waiting for shelter,
for people working to relieve want and need,
wherever they are, whoever they work with:

Lord of all,

we ask your blessing.

For children and young people,
for their families and friends,
for the old and infirm,
for the childless and the bereaved,
for those working to bring communities together:

God of all,

we ask your blessing.

For each Christian community meeting today,
for our leaders and all committed to their care,
for our missionaries, teachers and administrators,
our worship leaders and worshippers,
for all those working to forward your kingdom:

God of all,

we ask your blessing on this world.

Amen.

There are more prayers on the website, www.rootsontheweb.com.



Share the word

These ideas and illustrations offer starting points for your own reflections around two possible messages from today's focus reading, Genesis 18.1-10a.

A matter of preparation Abraham and Sarah take time out with unexpected visitors and discover God in their midst.

- The desert tradition of hospitality was critical – not only was food and drink shared, but those receiving hospitality came with news about the world in an age when people didn't write letters and there were no newspapers. Thus the process was mutual and gave dignity to both the travellers and the residents of the tent or oasis.
- This desert tradition remains evident in areas where nomadic people still travel. We also have nomadic people in our culture – homeless people, refugees, 'bag people' and travellers. How would we respond to people knocking on our door and asking for food? How do we respond to beggars in the streets? How would we respond to the idea of living this sort of life? What stories do your congregation have of encountering Jesus in 'wandering' people?
- Note the time that the meal takes to prepare. This is not a 'that'll do' attitude but a meal that takes hours to put together. It would have been eaten slowly with plenty of time for Abraham to sit and talk with his guests. Well-prepared rest and relaxation – how much of that do we share together? And with God?
- Courses such as 'Alpha' lay great emphasis on fellowship over a meal. How does your church community exercise hospitality within smaller groups? If you've tried it, you will know that the best relationships are grown over food and fellowship – but it takes time and commitment. Perhaps your fellowship could start such a group if this is new to you.

- Sarah would not have taken part in the social interaction – she was inside the tent, the men outside under the shade of the trees. How are people who are perceived as less important excluded from the conversations of the powerful in our society? In your church?
- Read on in the passage – Sarah laughs – why? To cover grief, embarrassment? When she is reprimanded, just like a small child, she denies her action. This is worth sharing. How often is that our response when God fulfils our wildest dreams with a miracle?
- Hebrews 13.2 tells us to be hospitable and may be referring to this Genesis passage: 'for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it'. Is this a maxim that we live by?

Barren transformation

How a word from God can turn lives upside down.

- Abraham and Sarah had been travelling for many years. They were childless, both were old and beyond childbearing age. For Sarah, this was the ultimate humiliation – the whole point of her life in her culture would have been as a mother to her family.
- Abraham and Sarah are rich in the eyes of the world, but lack the one thing that they truly desire in life – a child of their own. There may be folk in your congregation for whom this is also a painful reality. The condition of childlessness is one that families continue to find hard to address. Childlessness cannot always be sorted out through IVF, and some couples spend their life savings following this path. How do we cope when God doesn't give us what we desperately want and society implies is now our right? How does your church community embrace such couples and support them? How do you welcome those for whom childlessness is a decision?
- Barrenness may not be a lack of children. How many people, looking back over their lives, feel that they have achieved nothing? How many couples have children who have gone 'off the rails' or partners they are

separated from? Are there people in your congregation who have lost money or businesses? Most people have some 'barrenness'. How do we let God transform these parts of our lives, which may well be hidden from friends at church?

- Retell the story of Abraham and Sarah in order to place this scene in context. What does their story reveal about the way God works? Ponder on the juxtaposition of Abraham's desert experience and God's promises to him. Consider, too, Sarah's reaction to the news she is given. In what ways do we find this 'God of surprises' in our own lives and how do we respond? What can we learn from Abraham and Sarah?
- Abraham and Sarah were both recognised as old (v. 11). How much does your community value the elderly? Reflect on the history of your church and see how the present older members have played their part over the years.
- Old age can be a time to do new things. Many churches would die overnight without the wealth of experience and energy that the older members bring. But does your community encourage the older folk to try new things in church? Or do you stick to 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks'? If God was bringing a radical change for Abraham and Sarah, what about us?
- The good news of Jesus Christ offers total transformation for all, old and young. A grandmother was amazed to discover there was no upper age limit on baptism and confirmation within the Anglican Church. She immediately asked when the next course began. How is your church valuing the elderly whom you live and worship among?



Be creative

These suggestions offer ways to develop thinking around the focus Bible passage, exploring the same two messages as in *Share the word*. They could be used within the worship service (those in italics are particularly suitable when children are present) or during weekday meetings.

A matter of preparation

- You might like to have a bring-and-share meal as part of your worship today. Make sure it's clearly within the worship, not an optional 'add-on'. This means letting folk know beforehand that they'll be eating together and asking them to bring some food.
- If you've laid out your worship space in café style (see Set the scene), give people a few moments to enjoy the 'goodies' whilst sharing their concerns and joys and talking about their week.
- How do you welcome strangers? Are you showing them a face that will attract them? Using a flipchart or OHP, brainstorm how you could improve the welcome you give to new worshippers. Bear in mind that every church sees itself as 'friendly'. A church visitor tried to stay for coffee after the service, but was told that it was only for the regulars. Does your church have an equivalent blind spot? Have a look at some of the friendly and not-so-friendly welcomes the mystery worshippers from the Ship of Fools website receive (see Resources).
- Try using a prayer style that is different from your usual format: perhaps some candles and Taizé-type reflective music, offering worshippers space to 'tune in' to God's Spirit and reflecting the informal, relaxed feel of Abraham's meal with the strangers. Even scarier, how about silence for five minutes? You will need to help people into the silence (see Resources). Suggest they look at the thoughts that crop up and then imagine bundling them up and giving them to God.

Barren transformation

- *Do you have a set of identical twins in the worshipping community (or a couple of children who look alike from a distance)? If so, ask them to come to church with one in their best clothes and the other dirty, unkempt and in tatty clothes. You'll need a blanket or cloak that they can hide behind. Invite the twins out to the front of the church. Put the smart one behind the tatty one, and pretend that you're doing magic. As everyone says 'abracadabra' swap the twins over – rags to riches! Make a big thing about how clever this magic is, with your tongue firmly in your cheek! God turns our rags into riches – 'just like that'.*
- *Compile a book of children's sayings – the ones that are unique to children and that make you smile. Or prepare a booklet of children's prayers and take it to a local nursing home for the residents to read.*
- Has your church got a 'rent a granny' scheme? All the grandparents whose grandchildren live miles away sign up to be foster grandparents for just one child in the congregation. Families 'rent' their 'grandparent' (CRB clearance required). This way children and grandparents acquire new friends, and great cross-generation relationships are struck up.
- Ask older members of the congregation to write a series of articles chronicling the history of the church, through their eyes – not the big historic events, but the parties, the trips, the outings. Include them in your newsletter or magazine, or compile them into an album with photographs.
- Does your church have a surprising tale to tell, when something exciting and creative grew out of a seemingly barren situation? Invite people to reflect on this in small groups, perhaps thinking about surprises in their personal lives as well as in their shared life. Come back together and see if there are some surprises to be celebrated!



Music & resources

For a more extensive music list, see the website, www.rootsontheweb.com. Hymns in italics are particularly suitable when all ages worship together.

Widely available

All heaven declares

Be thou my vision

My God, how wonderful thou art

Seek ye first the kingdom of God

Through all the changing scenes of life

Will you come and follow me (The Summons)

Be still and know (Iona) (WG)

Bread is blessed and broken (CG, HON, WG)

God's love is deeper than the deepest

ocean (HON, KS)

I will offer up my life (KS, MP, SG, SHF, TS)

Jesus calls us here to meet him

(BPW, CG, CIF, WG)

Longing for light (Christ be our light)

(CG, LAU, TS)

Books

Anthony de Mello, *Sadhana: A way to God*, Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1984, ISBN 0385196148. For ways of entering silence.

Gerard W. Hughes, *God of Surprises*, DLT, 1996, ISBN 0232521530.

Taizé, Songs and Prayers from Taizé,

Geoffrey Chapman, 1991,

ISBN 0264672569.

Films

Babe (based on *The Sheep-pig* by Dick King-Smith), Universal DVD, 1995, U rating.

Beauty and the Beast, Disney, DVD 2002, U rating.

Both films are concerned with not judging by appearances – and the amazing things that then happen.

Website

www.shipoffools.com and click on 'mystery worshipper'.