

What a life.

Abraham had travelled from Ur to Haran, then been told by God to upsticks again, and off he went to Negev, even though he'd actually been told to stop at Canaan, and perhaps it served him right because there was drought in Negev, so he went on to Egypt and back to Negev and finally to the plains of Jordan. It is a story of great action, of many quarrels and battles, of subterfuge and cunning. But whoever Abraham was, he was not a poor migrant. He had large numbers of slaves, he had a fighting force, he had many animals. He was a ruler, albeit on a relatively small scale, but nevertheless, a ruler. A nomadic existence was common for herdsmen, but Abraham travelled far greater distances than usual and had to fight for his grazing rights. He was no pushover, he must have been quite a hard and ruthless man in his prime.

Nothing factual is known about Abraham, there is just the oral record written centuries later. But if, for the moment, we are to take the story as it is told, we can make some assumptions about Abraham. He was ambitious. He wanted to acquire land in which he and his people could roam freely and safely. He wanted to be a nation.

Perhaps that is why, in the account in Genesis, God waits until Abraham is 99 before making a covenant with him. By this stage Abraham is weak. He can no longer lead in battle. He is no longer a force to be reckoned with. His wife Sarah has not given him a child. There is to be no dynasty. All that he thought he was, all the things that he defined his existence by, have proved irrelevant and then, and only then, God makes this promise. Abraham will have a son by Sarah and God will make Abraham the father of nations, not of one nation, but nations.

It was as though Abraham had to no longer care about his status, how he defined himself, before God could work through him.

Is that what Jesus meant when he said "If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me."?

To take up your cross voluntarily, to be prepared to face crucifixion, or even, if we are using the phrase metaphorically, to bear the cost of humiliation and pain, that is extraordinarily tough, but at least it is possible. To deny oneself, that seems impossible. Because Jesus does not say deny yourself things. He is not talking about giving up luxuries, as we might for Lent. He is not even talking about giving up what we would regard as essentials. He is asking us to deny ourselves, our core understanding of who we are, our status, our role, our image of ourselves.

How do we do that?

When I get up in the morning I decide what to wear and what I choose depends upon what I am doing that day. All the time I am projecting an image, consciously or unconsciously. But quite separate from that, I have an idea of who I am. I am a wife. I am a mother. I am the Rector. I am kind to animals. I care about the environment even if I don't always act as though I do. I am a reasonable driver if not always patient. I am not as fit as I used to be. I get cross with the presenters on the Today programme on Radio 4. etc etc. This is who I am. So how do I deny myself? What does it mean?

Hidden within my list, hidden often from my conscious mind, is a subtext. Yes I am a Mother. I love my children, but I also want to be loved. Yes I am a Rector. I want to serve the parish but something in me wants to be valued. Yes I care about the environment. I want to do more but I also want to be seen to care. Each one of these goes unsaid, often unnoticed, but they are there and they are pointing back to me, saying: What do I get out of this? Suddenly it seems to be all about my ego, all centred upon me. That can't be right.

And no it isn't right. And that's what Jesus meant when he said deny yourself.

Love should never be about what we get back. Mission and service are not about being valued. Good deeds are not for show. All that matters is our relationship with God and our love and service to God's people and God's creation.

The words self denial conjure up greyness, joylessness. Nothing could be further from the truth. When our lives are centred upon God rather than ourselves, only then can we find joy in love, only then will we have real faith, only then will we understand that hope is not about what we might gain for ourselves in the future, but about a way of living.

It was when Abraham had achieved this state that God gave to him a covenant.

God has already given us a promise even though we might not yet be ready. Through Jesus Christ he has shown us the full extent of his love, he has shown us that he gives us total freedom, freedom to turn away from him, freedom to deny him, totally selfless love. And the promise is that if we choose to return his love by denying ourselves, we can live in him for all eternity and find all encompassing peace and joy.

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