

Genesis 18:1-15 The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. ² Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

³ He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord,^[a] do not pass your servant by. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. ⁵ Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant."

"Very well," they answered, "do as you say."

⁶ So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs^[b] of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread."

⁷ Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. ⁸ He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.

⁹ "Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him.

"There, in the tent," he said.

¹⁰ Then one of them said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. ¹¹ Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?"

¹³ Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' ¹⁴ Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son."

¹⁵ Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh."

But he said, "Yes, you did laugh."

Matthew 9:35 — 10:8 Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. ³⁸ Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.

² These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; ³ Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; ⁴ Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

⁵ These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. ⁶ Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. ⁷ As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' ⁸ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy,^[a] drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.

When were you last completely reliant on God? Not just quite hopeful that God would pull it out the bag for you, but utterly dependent? I suspect that for many of us this has *never* happened. There is a level of needing-to-be-in-control in most of us that is both important — because that is part of being mature and responsible — but also that

doesn't allow much space for God's grace or power to shape our lives. Perhaps that's how it's always been for most people? I don't know.

When I left theological college in 2016 my friends from my staircase bought the other leavers and me a few little prezzies — a big coffee mug, a playmobil Martin Luther, and a Freddo, a chocolate frog — you know, the essentials! What's with the frog? A reminder that we were supposed to be

Fully Reliant On God.

Most chocolate bars are quickly forgotten, but not that frog.

So that takes us to our Bible readings — Abraham, and also the disciples.

Think about Abraham. The Lord had promised him that he would be the father of many, and that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Yet he and Sarah were now old. There was no way they could fulfil that promise by any other means. To hold that hope required them to be *fully reliant on God*. Of course, perhaps you remember that God had made this promise a few chapters before, and Abraham and Sarah had taken things into their own hands, utilizing their slave-girl, Hagar, as a surrogate to bear a son called Ishmael. But this was not God's plan, and this was not the son. The Lord wanted Abraham to be fully reliant on God.

The good news comes in the form of three strangers, one of whom is the Lord, the other two are angels — we must resist the temptation to see this as the Trinity making a house visit.

The hospitality that Abraham shows is extraordinary. Water for their feet, fresh bread, a calf slaughtered, milk and curds brought to drink. He will not even sit while they eat — he is their servant. Abraham is a good man, servant-hearted to the core.

Sarah laughs at their announcement. Was it a simple laugh of joy? Not entirely — when challenged she denies it — she is incredulous. And the Lord asks the rhetorical question, 'Is anything too hard for the LORD?'

Abraham and Sarah are about to find out.

If we turn to Matthew we find that no sooner the twelve disciples are fully assembled they are sent out again. I was struck that Jesus observes first that the *harvest* is plentiful and the workers few, and then a paragraph later, he sends out the disciples to the *lost sheep* of Israel. So whether you are arable or pastoral, you know and understand the message. There is urgency, too. Farmers know that when the harvest is ready they work all hours of the day and night. Shepherds know that if a sheep is lost you need to look *now*, to save it.

And so, as I say, the disciples are sent out. To do what exactly? To proclaim that the kingdom of heaven is near! Great start. What else? To heal the sick, to raise the dead, to cleanse the leper, and to drive out demons. Can they do that in their own strength? I don't think so. Their first mission, their first action as disciples is to go, and proclaim, and to be *fully reliant on God* in the process. There is no other way.

Clearly these are exceptional stories. Are they for me or you? Perhaps they are! I was reminded recently of the story of Brother Andrew, God's Smuggler, who smuggled Bibles across the iron curtain in defiance of Soviet authority. He was fully reliant on God. And what a story!

We, as a group of churches have been urged to develop a mission plan. We are to desire growth, and to act on that desire in faith. And, in talking with PCCs and praying about it, we have some simple ideas of what we want to do to make growth happen. Some of these ideas are definitely within the realms of our capability — they are for me, and for us, to plan and do. But one or two of these are beyond our reach, in terms of guaranteeing a result. We are going to have to exercise our faith, to do what we believe God is calling us to do, and to have faith that this will not be fruitless. We must be reliant on God. Dare I say *fully* reliant on God?

As I pondered the story of Abraham and Sarah late into the night on Monday it occurred to me that this ageing couple might be a picture of our local churches — our benefice. We are mostly fairly old, and some may be close to despairing of children coming to our church — of our churches having spiritual descendants. But God came in person to tell Abraham and Sarah that they would have a child, and grandchildren, and so on. Sometimes, very occasionally, God whispers encouragement to me. I think this was such an occasion. I feel sure that our churches are about to start growing younger again.

But there are three things this will require. That we have faith. That we exercise welcome with the generosity of Abraham, and that we are, genuinely, Fully Reliant on God.

Amen.

SDG.