

So may I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I want to focus my words today on the Old Testament reading, the reading from the Hebrew scriptures, that great story about Abraham. Very, very important figure. Actually, an important figure in the three great monotheistic religions of the world, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. All look to Abraham as a father figure. He's mentioned over 70 times in the New Testament and discussed at length in the passage that we heard from our epistle. So, Abraham is a very important character. So, we'll stay with this story of Abraham or Abram as he's known early on before his name is changed later. And we'll see as we look at this story that the story of Abraham begins with a promise. And I want to pick out three characteristics of that promise that came to Abraham in this story.

First, we'll see that this story in Genesis chapter 12 is the story of a promise that comes to an individual. What we've seen in the previous 11 chapters at the beginning of the Bible in the Book of Genesis is huge cosmic stories on a universal scale. We hear of the creation of the world, we hear of the flood that covers the whole earth, and we hear of the Tower of Babel, the story about all the nations of the world and their confusion over languages. Then in Genesis chapter 12 with this story of Abraham, the spotlight falls on a particular individual, a man living in the town of Ur in northern Iraq, about 1900 BC. And God calls out to this man, Abraham, and makes him a promise that he'd be the father of many nations, that in him, the families of the earth would be blessed.

God makes many promises in the Bible, throughout scriptures, and like this one, they're never vague. They always come to specific people. God's words and actions are rooted in history. So, in Christianity, we're not peddling some sort of great grandiose story of the world or any general philosophy. We're talking about what's been termed the scandal of particularity. God is made known in history, coming to talk to particular people at particular times. He calls for a response from individuals just as he called Abraham to respond to his promise. So, the Bible is not a history of the world or an abstract philosophical tome. It's the story of God's dealings with individual people like Abraham. And the second thing I note about the promise is it's a promise made to an

unlikely person. God promised Abraham that he'd be the father of a great nation. But not only did Abraham at the time not have children or grandchildren, he was 75 years old. So, unless you're Al Pacino, that's rather late to be beginning a family,

Abraham's wife was of a similar age, and no wonder she famously found the suggestion laughable. God's promise came to Abraham when he was an old man with no descendants. He was an unlikely person to receive that promise. He was not the most obvious person for God to be working with. But then neither was Moses or Gideon or David or Peter or Paul. Many of the biblical characters don't have the CV of a hero or of a great spiritual leader. And that's been true for the whole history of the church since, God making unlikely promises to unlikely people.

There are many promises in the Bible, many of which apply to us. We too, like Abraham, are a people of promise. We've received the promise of forgiveness, the promise of new birth, the promise of new life, the promise of heaven and eternal life, the promise of justice for all God's people. So, what do we make of that? Do we dismiss all those promises as pie in the sky or dare we believe that one day all God's promises will be fulfilled? God's unlikely promises are for us, God's unlikely people.

And I want to have a word here to all those dressed in splendid pink T-shirts down the front here who we'll be thinking about later off to the Episcopal Youth event in Washington. And you are all at a very important stage of your life. And it's particularly important at this stage in that context that you remain open to what God is calling you to be. And when we pray for you later and I explain to everyone why you are wearing the same pink t-shirts, we pray that your time in Washington will be a time when you have a sense of God's call on your life, that you will hear God calling you as he called Abraham all those years ago.

The third thing about God's promise to Abraham is that it came along with a call. The Lord said to Abraham, "Go from your country and your kindred to the land that I will show you." That's a stark and challenging call. The call to leave your country precedes the promise of a blessing. And I was reminded of this call when I was on holiday recently,

reading a book by one of my favorite writers called Ian McEwan, who wrote a book a few years ago called *The Children's Act*. If you've not read it, you like Ian McEwan, you think you might read this book one day, cover your ears because I'm about to tell the whole story briefly. It's a story of a young man called Adam who's aged about 17, whose family are strict Jehovah's Witnesses, which is significant because he develops an illness where he needs a blood transfusion to save his life and the family deny him the transfusion.

But the doctors take him to court, and they end up winning. So, against the family's wishes, this young Adam has a blood transfusion and survives, but he ends up getting thrown out of his home and he comes to see the judge who made the ruling that he should have the transfusion, and he asked to live with her. And the judge says, "No, he couldn't." And the story ends very sadly and tragically with young Adam taking his own life. But the book concludes with this. "Adam came looking for her," the judge, "and she offered nothing in religion's place." And that's a bit of a parable I think about our modern, secular world. There's a strong push to leave. We're all encouraged to leave, to leave behind the faith of our forebears, to leave behind the certainties that have held society together for centuries, to head off into a brave new godless world but that godless world is a void. There's an emptiness about it.

Secularism calls people to leave faith behind but fails to offer anything meaningful in its place. The hope, comfort, and security of faith have no equivalent in secularism. And this was a point made by the pop singer, Nick Cave, recently. He spoke at the Hay Festival last week and he said this, "I think we got rid of religion essentially, which may or may not be a good thing, but there's a vacuum that we created that we don't really know what to do with. And I think that it's been filled with people trying to find spiritualness in the wrong things like politics, for example." The call on Abraham's life, the call for him to leave was matched by a promise of blessing. He wasn't called to emptiness; he was called to hope.

And that's why he could respond in faith and follow that call. He trusted God to ensure that he wasn't walking into a void. St. Paul says of him, "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed." The writer to the

Hebrews says this, "By faith, when called to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, Abraham obeyed and went even though he did not know where he was going." He didn't know where he was going, but he did know who was leading him, who was calling him. He knew he wasn't alone. And that for Abraham was sure grounds for hope. Abraham continues to be a wonderful example to us because he lived a life full of faith and hope. The call of God still comes to God's people just as it came to Abraham. We too are a people of promise. The story of Abraham provides us with a challenge. Will we like him respond with faith? Can it be said of us that we, against all hope, in hope believed?

God's promises are for each of us, and God's call comes to each of us and just as Abraham didn't know where he was being called to, so too we don't always know where we are going. We'd all prefer to travel from the unknown to the known. We'd all prefer guarantees rather than promises, but that isn't the life of faith. We, like Abraham, are constantly heading off into the unknown. When I was on holiday, I caught up with lots of my old friends and I was talking with them and I was surprised that one or two of them are absolutely terrified by the thought of retirement, of heading off to a stage of life which doesn't center around work. I spent lots of happy times with my mother and she reminded me of the uncertainty of heading into old age.

Our graduates are all heading into an unknown stage of life. We're all in some sense, like Abraham, being constantly called into the unknown. And let's look to respond as he did, with faith and hope. Like Abraham, we're a people of promise. Let's claim that promise, that the God who calls us will always be with us. Amen.