

2021-02-28 Harwell and Chilton Churches

Genesis 17 & Romans 4 – Righteousness by Faith

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On 6 April 2020, at the age of 99, former Army Officer Captain Tom Moore began to walk one hundred lengths of his garden in aid of NHS Charities Together, with the goal of raising £1,000 by his 100th birthday. In the 24-day course of his fundraising, he became a popular household name in the UK, he raised over £30 million and in recognition of his efforts, he received the BBC Sports Personality of the Year, was appointed honorary colonel and was knighted by the Queen at Windsor Castle. Captain Tom died just died 4 weeks ago at Bedford Hospital a national hero.

Our Old Testament reading begins with another 99 year old, who embarks on a long walk, a journey from his homeland in Harran to the land of Canaan in response to God's call. Abraham is famous not for raising millions, but for becoming "the ancestor of a multitude of nations".

The fundamental thing that we need to remember about Abraham is that his significance and the reason

for his ongoing fame some 4000 years later, is not what he did, but what was done for him and through him. The story of Abraham is not a story of human achievement, but of the fulfilment of divine promise. Abraham is cited in the Old Testament as the very model of righteousness, and the pattern of all who are justified before God. But he – and they – are not righteous because of who they are or what they achieve. They are righteous because of who God is and what he has done. A gracious, loving God offers as a free gift to be God to us, and for us to be his people. God freely offers to us his hand of fellowship; we need simply to respond.

The word righteous – like the word holy – has a rather religious and intimidating sound to it, I think. It suggests something that is not attainable by normal human beings like you and me; a state of being that regular humans can never achieve. And in one sense that it true; the words righteous and holy can be used to describe a morally pure state; being like God. But these words are also used to describe us in relationship to God, whether we are in right standing with him; to put it in sporting terms, whether we are on his side, or

on the other side. It is this type of 'righteousness' that Abraham has, that he is offered and accepts it as a free gift from God.

Whilst at school, it was common to begin a PE lesson or playtime with captains – often self-appointed – choosing their teams. Those who were to play the game, whatever it was, would line up, and the captains would take it in turn to pick team members. Usually based on a combination of sporting prowess and general popularity, the line-up was gradually whittled down to those considered to be the least valuable or worthy member of the team. A savage process, many of us were emotionally scarred by the humiliating experience!

In biblical terms, being holy – or sanctified – is being chosen and set apart by God. Being righteous is being made part of God's team. And the point here is that God does not choose us on the basis of our qualifications, because we have made the grade or are somehow better than others. In fact, God chooses the smallest, weakest and least deserving. God whose very nature is love is able to express that love in the fullest way when he freely chooses those who are the least

deserving! I'll repeat that, because I think it's important: God whose very nature is love is able to express that love in the fullest way when he freely chooses those who are the least deserving! We can be holy or righteous not because of what we are, but because of what God is! And it is because it is dependent not on fallible, weak humans but an infallible, almighty God, that that status is guaranteed. Our part is simply to accept the invitation, to join the team, to own the identity and to live in the reality. Our part is to do what the Bible calls having faith.

Notice in our reading how many times God says "I will". I counted at least 8 in about as many verses. And we shouldn't be surprised at this. The Bible starts with God freely willing into being the universe from nothing. St Paul, in our New Testament reading, reminds us that as well as creating the universe *ex nihilo* is also able to bring life out of death. He is also capable of creating from our moral barrenness the fruit of righteousness. Making something out of nothing because of his love is what God does. Our right standing before God comes out of nowhere, 'out of the blue' – it is a free gift of God.

And like any gift, it needs to be accepted and enjoyed. A free ticket to a concert needs to be presented at the door. A birthday cheque needs to be paid into your bank account. A new car needs to be started up and driven! Accepting and using and living in the reality of our God-given righteousness is what the Bible calls faith. Believing God's promises and living our lives as if they are true characterises God's people. Abraham is the Old Testament example of a life lived in that way. Abraham like every human is not perfect, he makes mistakes, his faith wavers, but fundamentally he believes and holds on to the promise of God, is reckoned as righteous, and comes to know and enjoy the promised blessing of God.

Abraham – and all of God's people – are promised an inheritance. It is not based on what we do, but on who we are in relation to God. As adopted children, graciously chosen and made part of the family of God, we are inheritors of the kingdom of God. Our membership of God's family and all that goes with that does not depend on what we do, but on what God has done. It is simply for us to understand, accept and live in that reality of God *being God* to each of us.

Abraham is the ancestor of all God's people, not just physically, but spiritually. The true children of Abraham, and of God, are not those who share his genes, but share his faith, who hear and trust God's promises and live as if they are true.

Biblical, saving faith is taking God's promises to be true, and living accordingly. Righteousness is a gift, freely offered, but that needs to be accepted. To be without blame before God is possible for all people, whoever we are, whatever we have done, because God loves us and because of the death and resurrection of Jesus our Lord.

Captain Tom was made a knight of the realm by the Queen. Every believer in Christ is son or daughter of the King of the Universe and an inheritor of God's kingdom. Freely bestowed on all who put their faith in Jesus, the gift of righteousness puts us in a right standing, a right position, a right relationship with God, with God being God to us. Our lives should henceforth be lived in that reality; being blameless. Because that is what we are when we accept that amazing gift of God's grace.