

## Trinity 5 2020 (12<sup>th</sup> July)

Gen.18.1-15; 21.1-7 / Mt 9.35-10.8

### *Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?*

These words spoken by God to Abraham in this morning's first reading are exactly the same as the angel Gabriel said to Mary when he announced to her the forthcoming birth of Jesus.

It's not surprising that when St Luke wrote about the conception of Jesus, he should remember the story of Isaac: babies are not supposed to be born to a virgin or a ninety year old woman, whose husband was ninety-nine!

Of course, God, who created out of nothing, is not constrained by the normal limits of nature, but neither Mary on the one hand nor Sarah and Abraham on the other expected to be God's chosen agents in carrying his purposes forward. In any case, none of them realised at the beginning of their respective stories that it was God himself who was speaking to them in their angelic visitors.

So it is also not surprising that they should have their doubts. Mary asked "How can this be as I am a virgin?" while Sarah (and Abraham too in an earlier version of the same story) laughed when they heard what was being said to them.

There is one other parallel I want to mention: the Bible presents Mary, Sarah and Abraham to us as devout wanting to play their part in the unfolding of God's plans.

Well, enough about the link between this morning's first reading and the Christmas story. I am going to talk rather about the mysterious visitors to Abraham's desert tent.

Abraham should I suppose have suspected something out of the ordinary as the three men suddenly appeared in front of him. Neither he nor any member of his household seems to have seen or heard them coming. But whether that detail is relevant or not, the normal courtesies of desert hospitality immediately kicked in. A lavish feast is prepared, though Abraham modestly describes it as “a morsel of bread”. While his guests eat, Abraham stands by in case they need anything else. So far, a relatively straightforward tale of welcoming strangers.

After they have finished eating however the story takes the unusual turn we heard about. We must make cultural allowances for what seems to us the discourtesy of the guests in leaving Sarah out of the initial discussion, even though she was listening from inside the tent. That does however allow the narrator to include a rather poignant detail. We have already heard that Sarah laughed when she heard she was to have a son. But we were told “she laughed to herself”; the Bible actually says “inwardly”, in other words so that no one could hear. The visitors do hear however and we have that rather touching exchange, “Why did you laugh?” Sarah denied because she was afraid, and he said “No, but you did laugh”. The rest as they say is history and I only need to point out that the root of the name of the miraculously born child, Isaac, is the Hebrew word “to laugh”.

Now that little lecture was not just to keep you entertained or informed, but to set the scene for three lessons that seem to me to be particularly important in this incident and which have some special relevance during these difficult times.

The first is the rhetorical question with which we started: *Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?* Of course not. Even the usual orderliness of things

rests on God's will, so when things go awry, like in the present pandemic, we can be confident in God's final sovereignty. As Cardinal Newman once famously wrote, *He knows what he is about.*

Second, God discloses himself and his plans gradually. We shouldn't expect to know all the answers in advance or, as we say, to have everything neatly buttoned up in our heads. Remember that even science, one of God's greatest gifts, proceeds by stages. We understand more as we go along.

But third: in order to be in a position to recognise when God is speaking to us and understand more of his plans for us, we need first to be willing to receive him in whatever unexpected and strange ways he comes to us.

There is something else as well, a moral lesson to learn from this morning's first reading. This was well summed up in the Letter to the Hebrews in an obvious allusion to this passage, *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.*

Our willingness to receive God in the way he chooses to come to us is tested by our behaviour towards others, especially those who are in different ways strange to us. One of the most inspiring bits of biblical teaching is how in the Old Testament God tells his people to treat strangers and migrants: *"The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God."*

It was with this in mind that last month Pope Francis added *"Comfort of migrants"* to the traditional titles of Mary, Mary, who discovered like Sarah before her, that God comes to us in unexpected ways. If we are open to such

surprises, who knows what God might achieve in us too, for nothing is too wonderful for the Lord.