



Sermon preached by Revd Professor David Thompson on 7th June 2026

Readings: Genesis 12: 1 – 8; Romans 4: 13-25; Matthew 9: 9 – 13

Trinity 1

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out not knowing where he was going (Hebrews 11:8).

1 Have you ever had the experience of driving behind a car in Cambridge and suddenly concluding that the driver in front of you does not know where he (or she) is going. As the time I spent in the city gradually increased, I found that the number of such occasions was steadily increasing; and even since I stopped driving regularly, I have continued to find this, sitting alongside the driver rather than being in the driver's seat. Of course, Cambridge does have a lot of tourists, but perhaps particularly the parents of students making visits at the beginning and end of term.

On the principle of 'it takes one to know one', I have to admit that I have always been aware of this problem when visiting a church to preach or for a meeting, if I have not been to it before, and always try to make sure in advance that I know how to find where I am supposed to be going. It's a lot easier now that one can use the internet, or more particularly Google, to solve these problems rather than simply having a map with most appropriate scale.

2 Today we are thinking about who is in and who is out, and we are given readings from different parts of the Bible to guide us to find the answer. One thing that immediately attracts our attention is the use of the figure of Abraham. He is invoked by Jesus himself, particularly in John's Gospel, in a way quite distinct from Moses, who led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and was responsible for receiving the Ten Commandments in the wilderness at Mount Sinai. In fact, Abraham is invoked in two different ways in the New Testament; one is our Epistle reading from Paul to the Romans; the other from where I took my text in the Letter to the Hebrews.

3 I have always been struck by the verse in Hebrews, because I have never been able fully to grasp the idea that someone should be commended for setting out without knowing where he was going. It just goes clean against what would otherwise be regarded as 'common sense'. Indeed if you did it today and you had a child with you, you might find yourself reprehended under safeguarding regulations. Yet the writer to the Hebrews sees this as proof of Abraham's faith. Both Paul and the writer to the Hebrews regard Abraham's faith as the most convincing proof of his commitment to God - absolute trust in what he was told. Paul regarded Abraham's readiness to believe God's promise that he would become the father of a great nation at his age as, if anything an even greater sign of trust and certainly greater than that of Sarah, whose response to the same promise was simply to laugh. That is certainly a response I can understand.

4 I guess that the call of Matthew in our Gospel passage is similar. There is no explicit statement about whether Matthew knew where he was going; rather, what is striking is that Jesus should call a tax-collector as a disciple in the first place. It is well known that tax-collectors were some of the most unpopular officials in the Palestine of Jesus's time. Not only are tax-collectors rarely popular officials in any society, though I am not casting any aspersions on those who work for the Inland Revenue: my father did for a while. But the way that taxes were collected in Roman society was particularly problematic. It was as though, if fixed sums were collected from everyone, that would have involved far too much work. Instead, a tax-collector would contract with the authorities to pay a given sum, which he would then seek to recover from 'his area' in whatever way he could, obviously aiming to make a profit on the whole deal, for that was where his income came from. I have always found it interesting that it was apparently Judas Iscariot who looked after the purse for the disciples, and not Matthew with his financial experience, but that is by the way

5 How does all this relate to the question of who is in and who is out in God's kingdom? It all relates to the way in which the mission of the people of Israel is interpreted by Jesus. If you read Genesis 12 carefully, you will see that God's promise to Abram is quite explicit, and it includes several elements: he will be given a land; he will be made a great nation; he will be blessed, as will those whom Abram blesses; and in him all the families of the earth shall be blessed (v. 2). Put another way, the

'chosen people' (as they came to be known) are not, as it were, the winners in a competition; they are to be the means of blessing for all the nations. God's intention, as it is presented in the call of Abraham, is to be the means of blessing for all nations, not just a way of picking out a chosen few.

6 As Jesus said so often, he did not come to overthrow the law, but to fulfil it. The problem was that his idea of fulfilment did not fit the understanding of the religious leaders of his day, such that they viewed him as a threat to their authority as interpreters of the law, and even to the security of the nation by exposing them to a risk of threatening the compromise settlement they had effectively reached with the Roman authorities to ensure their own continued role in the life of the nation.

7 That challenge has continued to confront Christians, as individuals and as churches, down the centuries. The particular issues may change - indeed they are always changing, but in other ways they are always the same. The same question remains: how important is it to know precisely where we are going before we set out? Can we only move, if we are not prepared to change our plans if that becomes necessary?

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