



Sermon preached by Revd Chris Baker on 5th July 2026

Readings: *Matthew 11.16-19, 25-30; Genesis 24. 34-38, 42-49, 58-67*

In the Hub here at Downing Place, there is often a jigsaw on a table inviting people to take a look and maybe put in a piece or two. I enjoy doing jigsaws though they can be very time consuming but the ones I like best are WASGIJs. I'm sure some of you will know of them. The picture you are creating is not the picture on the box. The picture you are creating is what the people in the picture are seeing. So you need to use your imagination. You can see the setting. You can see the expression on people's faces; are they laughing, are they frightened, what are they thinking? You have to imagine what is happening. You may work on blocks of colour. You may spot particular themes and you have to imagine how they work together.

Imagination is a wonderful gift, not just for jigsaws. In many activities imagination is essential. Developments in science, in medicine, in the arts, can all be driven by our imagination. Imagination and creativity go hand in hand. I always think that archaeologists need an active imagination. They seem to be able to find a broken piece of pottery, for example, and create a picture of a people, of a community, of trade links across great distances. A simple glass bead can speak of glass workers on Murano or contents of a broken bowl may reveal the health of the people. Some holes in the ground may suggest a henge, or a village may be conjured up. Absolutely fascinating. But sometimes we need to develop that gift as we pick up our Bibles and seek to dig out the wisdom and the truth. We are invited to explore ancient thoughts, to discover the way ideas and views of God developed, to discern truth, to discover or be discovered by the living God.

Last Sunday Robert Pope led us to explore the extraordinary story of Abraham and Isaac. In many ways it is an awful story and yet it is a little gem. To the Jews the story is known as the AKEDAH and it is understood to be about the final testing of Abraham as the first Jew. If you weren't here last week or if you can't remember, I will say that the story involved Abraham being told by God to go and sacrifice his son, his only son, his beloved son. Would Abraham be willing to do it? Was it really a test of his love of God before all else? Although he built an altar, piled on the wood and bound Isaac, to everyone's relief he did not have to go through with it. He was stopped from sacrificing Isaac and a ram was substituted for the sacrifice. Abraham called the place where this happened **'The Lord will provide' as it is said to this day 'On the mountain of the Lord it shall be provided.'** Now, that's what it says in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which is the one we use here but, in the Jewish Study Bible it says that Abraham named the site *Adonai-yireh* (or the Lord will see) hence the present saying, **'On the mount of the Lord there is vision'**. Same text – different translation. Now I am no Hebrew scholar but it is one of the fascinations of Bible Study to compare various translations. In the Old Testament there are sometimes two versions of history and I remember hearing that the scholars of old would say you must consider both versions and seek the truth somewhere in the middle. And if we do that, we may need our imagination.

Today's story creates the longest chapter in the Book of Genesis. Abraham returns to the two men who had accompanied him and they return home. But there is no mention of Isaac. That's where our imagination comes in. We don't know how old he was but he was certainly a teenager or older because we know he was strong enough to carry the bundle of wood for the sacrifice, and would surely have been a big bundle. What did he think about his father, the father who seemed willing to slay him? Did he understand? Was he mad with his father? Did he lose confidence in his father? Did he part company with his father? We can only guess as we may bring to bear our relationships with our own fathers. Do we feel that we suffered in any way because of our fathers' faith or beliefs? Or are we just eternally grateful?

But Abraham still dearly loved his son and he was also aware of the promise that God had given him – that he would make his offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. For that to happen, in any legitimate way, Isaac had to have a family, and for that to happen in any legitimate way, he had to have a wife. For sure there were girls around and no doubt Isaac could

have taken his pick but they were Canaanites. They had their own gods and might not wish to follow the God of Abraham and Isaac. Indeed they might dilute Isaac's faith which would have been disastrous. And years later, when the people of Israel came out of Egypt to possess the land Moses declared that the Lord said **Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons, or taking their daughters for your sons for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods.** In the Book of Deuteronomy he actually says a good deal more which is distinctly uncomfortable but, to be sure, Abraham needed to ensure, as far as he was able, that Isaac would build on the foundations of his faith. So what should he do? He sends his oldest and most trusted servant on a mission – to go back to Abraham's homeland, back to his people, back to his extended family and find there a **suitable** wife for his son.

So imagination time again. If we had been that trusted servant, what would we have done? How would we have gone about finding a wife for our master's son. It was surely no easy task. Undoubtedly, he would have known Isaac well. Known his strengths. Known his weaknesses. How to find a wife? He made his way to Aram-naharaim which was where Nahor, one of Abraham's brothers lived. He spotted a well and sat down close by with his camels, to wait and watch. He knew that in the evening the women would come to draw water. He could watch. He would see. But he wouldn't leave anything to chance. He took to his feet and offered up a prayer. **O Lord, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. I'm standing here by the spring of water, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water. Let the girl to whom I shall say 'Please offer your jar that I may drink' and who shall say, 'Drink and I will water your camels' – let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master.**

It's a lovely thought really. I'm sure any parent is concerned about their child's potential partner. You just have to trust them. That goes for Grandfathers too. I talk to God about my grandsons' girlfriends, my granddaughters boyfriends. They don't know it but he and I know it. And we watch.

And God watched with Abraham's servant as he approached Rebekah who did all that was requested. At once the servant knew that this was the girl and he gave thanks to God for leading him to approach the right person. The family all agreed and actually asked Rebekah if she was willing to go to be Isaac's bride. She agreed and so she left them with their blessing ringing in her heart and was escorted to the Negeb where she met Isaac and became his beloved wife.

But what about that question with which we started out – the difference in the translations: **On the mountain of the Lord it shall be provided** or **On the mountain of the Lord there is vision.** Let us take them in reverse order for surely whether on the mountain or anywhere else the Lord indeed has the vision, he sees and knows us. He knows us and sees our situations, our problems, our opportunities, our hopes and fears. He knew Abraham and saw into his heart of hearts. What has looked like a test set for Abraham to discover whether he truly loved God or not was, I believe, no test at all. God knew him and knew his faith. God knew the answer. The question was, whether Abraham knew it, whether Abraham understood the depth of his faith, the ground for his confidence. Did he trust himself? Did he understand that God was with him. The drama, then, was that Abraham was confirmed in his conviction that the Lord was with him and **THAT GOD WOULD PROVIDE** – the vision and provision go together and Abraham's faith would go on to be the bedrock of Judaism, and therefore of our faith too, in and through Jesus Christ.

At some time or another we all face questions, problems, crises of one sort or another, even of faith and God sees and knows and understands. He invites the weary, the burdened, the bewildered to come and realise his company, his companionship. He invites us to walk with him. Life is not always easy, there are hard times, with difficult decisions to be made but we are not alone. He invites us to use our imagination and see, beyond the problems of this world, the glories of a life with him. And as we travel that road we may come for rest and refreshment, for food and sustenance, for bread and wine, for the divine presence. The God of Abraham, Isaac and of Israel is here. To the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be all thanksgiving and praise, now and forever.

Chris Baker

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