

## **Abraham the man of failure**

When Stephen Rose, a professor at the Open University, wrote in his introduction to the Canongate edition of the book of Genesis that the Abraham of the Bible seemed to behave more like Sarah's pimp than Sarah's husband there was obvious outrage. Surprisingly that outrage came neither from the Christian nor Jewish communities in Britain but from the Muslim community.

They were outraged that their great patriarch Abraham could be written about in such a way and yet the bizarre truth is that, as we discovered ourselves when we read Genesis 20 earlier, Stephen Rose seemed to be somewhat painfully faithful to the biblical text in his comments. If the Abraham of chapter 22 is Abraham the man of faith then we can clearly see that the Abraham of chapter 20 is Abraham the man of failure.

Failure is a very hard thing to cope with, wherever or whenever it happens. We can fail for all sorts of reasons. We can fail to do the right thing out of fear or pressure. We see other people doing the wrong thing and so we are scared to stand out and do the right thing. We can fail out of stupidity, knowing what we should do but just failing to do it. We can fail out of malice, when we just don't want to do the right thing for whatever reason.

In churches we don't cope very well with people messing things up or failing, do we? We like to reward success of course, but when people fail we like to brush it under the carpet, pretend that it never happened. Or even worse when something goes badly wrong we rush around trying to find out whom to blame.

I once saw a really bad example of a church not being able to cope with failure. It happened to a girl called Leanne. Leanne had started going to a Scottish Baptist church when she was about fifteen. She hadn't come from a Christian family and knew very little about Christianity or what it meant to be a Christian.

Now Leanne was what you would call a simple soul. If you wanted to picture her then think of a slightly less plump freckled version of Jade Goody from Big Brother. She had all of Jade's quick wit and intellectual brilliance. What she had found when she started coming along to church was a group of people who accepted her and for a time showed her how much Jesus loved her. She had come from quite a difficult family background and so I'm sure much of this was new to her.

Then disaster struck! Leanne got pregnant and all of a sudden the caring Christian fellowship that had been so nice to her before this began to shun her. This very public failure seemed to be too much for them. One by one, on their own and in groups, almost as though they were doing this together in an organised way they began to isolate her, treating her as though she was the only person in that entire fellowship that had ever sinned.

She was no longer allowed to help in the youth club, she was discouraged from going to youth fellowship in case she spread bad ideas among the young people, the young people themselves, well, you can imagine the rude things that they said about her behind her back and even occasionally to her face! Pretty soon Leanne became isolated and left that church. I don't know if she has ever been back to church again.

One of the worst aspects of failing is that we can feel as though we were the only people who have ever failed; we can end up feeling lonely or isolated. All people fail at some point in their lives but Christians can be very good at pretending that they never fail. We are always marching onwards in the light and power and strength of God. Everything is always going well. How are you doing? OK.

All people fail at some time or other and that means that Christians fail too, we aren't invincible. Thankfully the Bible seems to be full of stories about people who fail. Abraham is only one of a long line of Men and Women of faith in the Bible who take one step forward and then at least one step back again.

The writer of Genesis seems to arrange Abraham's story in such a way as to deliberately set Abraham's great successes or moments of spiritual insight right next to his great failures or moments of doubt. I'd never thought about this before but Calvin in his commentary on Genesis tells us that this encounter with Abimelech was probably an incident from earlier in the life of Abraham that the writer of Genesis has told us in, as it were, flashback.

He seems to place the story here deliberately to remind us, just before the birth of Isaac that this is still the same old Abraham that we are talking about here, not some new super-spiritual replacement. This is the same eejit who failed to trust God in Egypt and now in Canaan, the kind of man who can make the same mistake twice but by the grace of God (and only by the grace of God) he manages to get out of this one without any major trouble.

The most ironic thing about this story is that Abimelech the Canaanite king is the one who fears God and does the right thing. It is Abraham, the one who is supposed to be the man of God who tries to worm his way out of the situation through lies and half-truths. In this story it is the Canaanite king who listens to God and carries out his will while Abraham the man of God seems determined to rely upon the same old plan that failed him once before and got him expelled from Egypt.

Abraham's weakness and stupidity not only causes him and his wife harm and embarrassment but also affects those around him. If Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah is Abraham's finest moment in the book of Genesis then among his worst is his treatment of Hagar. To have treated a pregnant woman in the manner that both he and his wife treated Hagar is bad enough but you would have thought that he would at least have had some kind of compassion towards the woman who was carrying his child.

We all, no matter how good we might appear in front of other people, have a bad side to us that can show itself in all sorts of unexpected ways. Abraham could be a faithful and trusting man, he could be a generous man when it came to his nephew Lot, he could be a gracious man when it came to interceding in prayer for Sodom and Gomorrah, but when you look at how he treated this servant whom he had taken for his wife and got pregnant, then we can see how Abraham could be a thoroughly heartless man.

Sometimes failure isn't just the recklessness of a young girl or the fear of a weak old man, failure can take the form of a deliberate and malicious rejection of God's laws. Abraham knew enough about God to know that it was wrong for Sarah to mistreat Hagar enough to make her want to run away, pregnant though she was. The angel of God sent Hagar back to Sarah but he in no way condoned Sarah's harsh treatment of her or Abraham's turning a blind eye to all that was going on.

Those deliberate failures can be the worst to recover from, either because we are stubborn in our disobedience or because we feel that somehow God cannot or will not forgive our wilful disobedience of him. But even those deliberate failures can be forgiven. In the Church of Ireland liturgy they pray these words in their prayer of confession. "We have sinned against you and against our fellow men in thought and word and deed, through negligence, through weakness and through our own deliberate fault. We are truly sorry and repent of all our sin."

Those words are written in the awareness that God is willing to forgive not just our accidental sins but even those that are our own deliberate fault. God forgives Abraham for his deliberately cruel treatment of Hagar but he also looks after Hagar and recompenses her for the harsh treatment that she received at the hands of her husband. She becomes the mother of a great nation and her son also receives a blessing from God, despite his rejection by his father.

So even Abraham's deliberate failures are not beyond the action of God's grace. Through Grace God saves him from trouble after trouble, brought about either by his stupidity, cowardice, malice, weakness or faithlessness. Time after time God steps in to pick up the pieces of Abraham's life after Abraham himself has made a mess of things.

Why does God put up with this man who fails him so often? Well, we could ask the same thing about ourselves couldn't we? Why does God continue to put up with us when we keep sinning against him? The simple reason and yet the one which is most difficult to understand is that God does it because he loves us. God loves you and me enough that he is prepared to forgive us our sins and continually restore the relationship with him that we seem so determined always to break.

As we heard last week this cost God so much, it cost him the life of his one and only son, whom he loved. If God has paid such a high price for us he is not going to give us up too easily. He will not allow our foolishness, our unfaithfulness or our downright disobedience to build up a barrier between him and us. He is determined in his love for us. He is committed to us in a way that we have never been able to be committed to him.

Through the power of his Holy Spirit he convicts us of our sin to draw us back to him. Through his grace he seeks us out to restore us. As we have read there were times when there really was nothing going for Abraham that could commend him to God, there was no reason for God to love him. God couldn't say, "Oh look! There is Abraham who is always faithful to me whatever the cost," for that just isn't the Abraham of the Bible.

The Abraham of the Bible is every bit as weak and foolish as we are. The Abraham of the Bible has failed as publicly as the Leanne's of this world. The Canaanite rulers around him put the Abraham of the Bible to shame as regards righteousness and bravery and yet God is still faithful to him. The Abraham of the Bible deserves God's grace no more than you do and yet just like us he receives it and he lives by it.

So whatever you have messed up, whatever you have failed at, whether it has been one of those big mistakes that change the shape of our lives or our everyday, horrible little betrayals of Jesus. For all of these things and more there is grace. Grace to forgive and grace to transform us and make us new again. Abraham was not beyond God's grace, no matter how and when he had failed. Grace was there for him, actively seeking him out.

Grace searches for us too in the same way. This evening whether you are a Christian or not, whether you feel like a failure or a success, whether you think you need it or not, let God's grace find you, touch you and change you just as it did long ago to Abraham.