

## Reflection for Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> June 2020

What are the Terebinths of Mamre?

It's a good quiz question.

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As a minister I always feel dread when taking part in a quiz if it's announced that there is going to be a round on the Bible. The fear of getting anything wrong – and of the subsequent ridicule --- is guaranteed to scramble my brain even more than it usually is.

But --- *What are the Terebinths of Mamre?* --- would bring some comfort –because I know the answer to that. Ever since I was a boy – in Church --- that phrase has stuck with me. It rolls nicely off the tongue and it conjures up – for me --- a drawing which appears in quite a few versions of the Bible --- of an eastern family – settled in an encampment and enjoying the shade of some large trees beside a water hole.

Abraham was a nomad --- moving from place to place to find pasture for his flocks --- but equally he was a pilgrim ---a man who had dedicated himself to following God – wherever God might lead him. For both reasons he had come to the terebinths – the oak trees of Mamre – and there, as he rested in the shade from the heat of the midday sun ----- three travellers came along. In the best traditions of the Middle East – Abraham offers hospitality to these strangers – mindful of the rigours of travelling when the sun is high. His decision was to be life changing.

**Pause**

In the weeks since Easter – we have reflected upon that time during which the disciples began to wrestle with the mysteries of the resurrection. Then we came to Ascension – the marking of the fact that eventually the physical resurrection appearances ended, and Jesus departed to be with his Father. We have remembered his command that the disciples must then wait – and his reassurance that God would send another to be their guide and strength – the Holy Spirit. We have reminded ourselves of Luke’s dramatic account of the fulfilment of the promise – as the Holy Spirit came to them on the day of Pentecost – and --- last week --- we noted that as a result of these experiences centred upon Jesus--- the Church came to understand that God is three in one --- the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit --- signifying perfect unity --- in unbroken relationship --- and constant dynamic movement.

Last week’s Gospel brought us the great commission of Jesus --- expressed in Trinitarian form --- sending his followers out to make disciples of all nations – and that commissioning is echoed in today’s reading from earlier in Matthew. The Lectionary of readings takes us back to the beginnings of Jesus’ ministry --- where – in the accounts of his calling of the 12 disciples and in the beginnings of Jesus teaching and preparing them for mission --- we find so much that is relevant as we reflect upon our own discipleship and the nature of our own Christian calling.

The passage from Matthew 9 emphasises the size of the task --- all hands are needed. It highlights the compassionate and pastoral concern of Jesus for those who were like sheep without a shepherd.

And Matthew also makes clear that the message which Jesus gives to his disciples – the Good News that they are to share – is precisely that message which Jesus himself proclaimed from the outset. In Matthew's words that message is "The Kingdom of Heaven has come near!"

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Elsewhere --- such as in Mark we hear "The Kingdom of God has come near!" The meaning is the same in both cases.

But what is that meaning?

In answering that we need look no further than Jesus himself. He it is who has come near. He is the new presence. When first he appeared and made his presence felt --- he was regarded as a Holy Man – a Rabbi – a teacher,

In time ---- such was his charisma – his power – his unique authority --- that those closest to Jesus concluded that he must be the Messiah – the one long promised by God – who would redeem captive Israel. That conviction persisted – but it was always tinged with doubt and confusion – because Jesus didn't otherwise fit the stereotypical understanding of what a Messiah would be.

Then came his ignominious death --- and the whole idea of his being the Messiah seemed to collapse like a burst balloon before --- out of the despair and dejection --- the risen Jesus begins to build his Church --- begins the transformation of disciples to apostles. The Holy Spirit brought the final element of God's work in Jesus --- as the Holy Spirit comes to be their guide and enabler.

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Centred upon Jesus --- the disciples have now experienced the Triune God --- Father, Son and Holy Spirit --- and they have been drawn by Jesus into the very being of God which that Trinity represents. They are drawn into unity --- they are drawn into a new relationship with God and with one another in God --- and they are drawn into the dynamism of that – the energetic movement that is the life and work of God.

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And that to which they are drawn by Jesus – is the Kingdom of Heaven --- the Kingdom of God. It has come near in Jesus --- and that is the Good News. It is here! It is now! It is eternal! And God wants you and he wants me to take our place in it – and so find eternal life.

The work of proclaiming that Good News is now ours – in this generation. And if our proclamation is to have any substance – any impact – any authority – any charisma --- then it must come from within the life of the Kingdom – which is the life of God. Our first priority is to embrace that life for ourselves – from which our proclamation will follow inevitably. It is daunting! It is exciting! It is urgent!

### Pause

In closing – let us return to the Terebinths of Mamre --- and to Abraham.

Abram had already dedicated himself to God --- he was already a pilgrim of the Kingdom.

But Abraham still had a huge amount to learn. Not least --- he had no idea of the power and the possibility of God.

He had to learn --- and so God sent his messengers to Abraham.

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Yet the account tells us that these messengers were going to pass by Abraham! Key to the fulfilment of God's purpose were Abraham's own actions. Had he sat dozing in the shade and let the men go by --- well, the opportunity to learn and to discover the grace of God would have passed him by. But he did not --- and so the true adventure began.

Looking back on that; the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews reflects:

*“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”*

It was because Abraham did not ignore his neighbour --- it was because he gave up his doze in the shade --- it was because he made himself vulnerable by inviting complete strangers into his home ---that he discovered the true possibility of God --- and so became a giant of the faith.

This is the way of God. This is the nature of God. This is the Kingdom of Heaven and it will ever be so.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen