

A sermon preached by Bishop Brian Farran for the commissioning of the Reverend Scott Dulley in the parish of Muswellbrook 2012.

Text: Genesis 12: 1-9, Hebrews 11: 1-3 and 8-12.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.

January is that month of the year when we all join the former Prime Minister John Howard and become cricket tragi-comics! At the least, most of us feign a committed interest in the game.

We all know about classic catches, even if it is KFC that sponsors the competition. It is interesting to note the new variation this year – catch (d) is a dropped catch, not a classic catch at all.

Its inclusion reminds us that for all the celebration about fantastic classic catches, there are many dropped catches that are easily forgotten, as the commentator Mark Taylor attests.

Just as the television coverage of the Cricket Test matches features classic catches, so the Bible has its highlighted classic faith stories.

These classic stories are greater than the individuals who are celebrated by them. These stories are classic in that they lay down features of what it is to be faithful to God. These classic stories are stories for discipleship for all time.

These classic stories are stories for our life as a church now. These stories tell us about the promises of God and of those who caught hold of these promises and lived by these promises.

These classic stories reinforce our identity as God's people. These classic faith stories remind us of how we are to live and how we are to decide to be the church in our local settings.

Not only are there these classic stories of faith within the Bible, there are as well numerous stories of lack of faith, of disobedience to God's leading - the equivalent of dropped catches. There are stories of God-given opportunities dropped, not taken up, refused; even of deliberate snubbing of God and woeful disobedience.

These stories in the Bible are stories for all-time; they have a universal application to them. These stories of classic and dropped catches form a kind of template by which we can review our own personal and larger church histories of faithfulness or faithlessness.

The Biblical question forms itself over us: have we caught God's promises or dropped them? If there could be an equivalent to the KFC television series of classic cricket catches for this parish, how many catches of God's promises has the parish held, and how many has it dropped?

And it does matter –the answer to that question.

Whether it makes us squirm or whether we become hostile because such a question is raised, the question itself cannot be silenced or evaded. For whether we have held God's promises or let them slip through our fingers is the equivalent of a biblical question to which the church and its members are always answerable, even if they deny their answerability.

The issue of holding on to God's promise is central to the classic story of Abraham.

The story of Abraham is a marker in the book of Genesis between the history of the problem for humankind and the promise of God offering solution. Abraham is that kind of definitive figure.

Because Abraham represents the ideal of faithfulness, of holding on to the promise of God despite the apparent bleakness of his current situation, Abraham is celebrated in the New Testament as a model of faith. Hence the accolade in that great panegyric of faithful heroes in the Letter to the Hebrews:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.¹

Because Abraham caught God's promise by 'setting out not knowing where he was going', not knowing his exact destination, he brings into existence larger promises as the Letter to the Hebrews extols,

Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.'²

The story of Abraham offers this parish the prospect of God's promise. You have been through some recent hard times. Decline in congregations has been the story of this parish over the last decade or so.

In the past couple of years a few local people have put in the hard yards discovering the precise situation of the parish, working to stabilize its finances, to develop a strategic maintenance plan and to prepare for a fertile future.

We have attracted a priest from outside the Diocese (Scott Dulle) who has vision and experience in tackling the very issues that seem to have blighted this parish. The influence of Abraham is already at work here. Scott, Sarah and Georgia have made an Abrahamic journey to be with you.

In opening up this classic story of Abraham, I want to make its encouragement more explicit and more motivational.

The personal situation of Abraham when invited by God to move to the land of promise is bleak. Abraham is childless. There is no heir. Within Middle Eastern culture Abraham would end with his own death, given his childlessness.

And the wider history of humankind as narrated in the book of Genesis is equally bleak –it has a curse hanging over it after the fiasco of the Tower of Babel story in the previous chapter.

The great disclosure in the Abraham story is that this apparent barrenness is the arena of God's life-giving action.³ We in our situation as a church can extract from the Abraham story great hope for our own future as a church.

What looks like barrenness and utter bleakness can become life-giving, if we catch God's promise and align ourselves faithfully with God's vision. And the emphatic declaration in the Abraham story is that God does not depend on any potentiality in the one to whom God offers the promise, for both Abraham and Sarah were quite without potential.

However, the promise that lay with God's power and God's initiative became a reality through Abraham's faith, Abraham's obedience. This is how it will be for us as a church. In order for God to

¹ Hebrews 11:8.

² Hebrews 11:12.

³ See Walter Brueggemann.1982. *Genesis* in the *Interpretation Series*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, p.116.

lead the church out of barrenness, the church must become obedient to God's vision and take the risk of faith, just as Abraham did.

The history of many parishes is the history of parishioners simply wanting their own spiritual needs met without ever recognizing that God wanted them to become people willing to share their faith with others. And church leaders too are culprits in this evasion of responsibility for they have not worked to equip parishioners to undertake such sharing.

The Genesis story of Abraham makes it clear that Abraham was no spring chicken when he embraced the promise of God. The text declares that he was 75 years old, that age beloved of Anglicans who chorus that they are now retired and have done their bit for the Church!

But the Divine perspective is that God has a fondness for choosing the elderly to get things done, and it will be the situation here in Muswellbrook for some time to come.

What we older folk have to do is to offer affirming support and resources to our younger clergy in order that they can engage with their own age groups and begin the slow process of attracting their age cohort into committed Christian discipleship within this parish.

What we older folk have to do is to organize ourselves in care and support of one another so that the younger clergy have the time to be on this mission of potentiality. This is the kind of Abrahamic obedience that we have to embrace, if we want this parish to move out of barrenness into promise.

For most of my time here in the Diocese I have sought to hold up the story of Abraham as a classic story for our current discipleship. Most of the people who worship in the parishes of the Diocese are my own age or even much older. I think that my age has given me the authenticity to speak in a challenging way to the parishes, given that they could not dismiss me as some young upstart!

I am passionate about Abraham as a model of faith (as was Saint Paul too) for I believe that Abraham teaches us through his life a most fundamental lesson about life with God. The lesson is this, and it is a lesson I have put before the whole Diocese at Synod:

to stay in safety is to remain barren; to leave in risk is to have hope.⁴

If we try to hold on to selfish spirituality thinking that the Church is here for me, we will ourselves be barren, and so will the church. If however, we realize that we are here for the Church, then we are leaving barrenness behind (even if it seems risky) and we will be embracing hope – God's penultimate gift to the faithful.

Tonight is a night of promise. The promise of God that we can be fruitful is being divinely batted to us.

Hold on to that promise; do not drop it; do not let it slip through your fingers.

Let Abraham's classic story of faithful obedience become your own story of faithful obedience.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann. 1982. p. 118.