

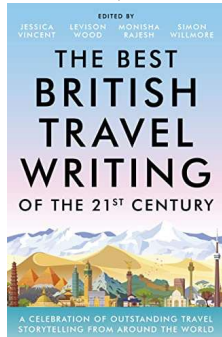
SERMON, 13 MARCH 2022 – GENESIS 15, LUKE 13.31-end



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

This week has not been easy to cope with – personally and on the News. Personally, I don't like being ill – I get angry, bored and frustrated – and my anger is only amplified at the news. The only consolation is that I am not the only one who has struggled with today's gospel. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it."

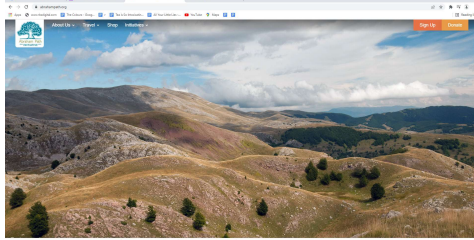
Let's go back several thousand years, back to the time of Abraham, and the warmth of what we would now call the Middle East. Actually we might be a bit to the east of that, over in current day Iran or Iraq. The Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the wandering tribes, travelling in the desert, oasis to oasis, following the animals, following the water.



To me that area is desert, war, chaos – Ayatollah Khomeini is the figure burned onto my memory, and I find he's been dead for 33 years. Saddam Hussein, killed 16 years ago. One of the positive things I've done this week is lots of reading – and I enjoyed *The Best British Travel Writing of the 21<sup>st</sup> century* (Jessica Vincent, et al, published on 10 March 2022 by Summerdale – the benefit of having a wife who gets review copies!).

The final essay is the story of a walking pilgrimage across the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, undertaken by Emily Garthwaite. She writes that "after the fall of Saddam Hussain in 2003, Kurds were granted an opportunity to establish control over their mountainous territory ... driven by oil-fuelled optimism, they transformed the region ... . The youth still remain optimistic about the future their forefathers fought for now that there is relative stability and security has returned to the area. ... Perhaps the greatest threat facing the region is not

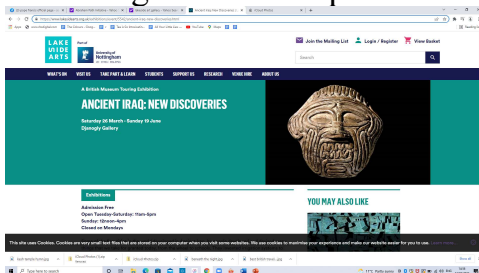
conflict, as many are led to believe, but rather globalisation. More than ever, traditions and heritage are on the verge of collapse – and these are the very things that walking trails seek to protect” [page 257).



<https://www.abrahampath.org/>

The walking trail in Iraq has been, in her words, “carved out” by the Abraham Path Initiative, an NGO based in Harvard. The cynic in me says that once again we have the Americans telling people elsewhere in the world what to do – but the positive person in me (and I am positive, promise!), the positive person says “marvellous” – anything that brings people together, that slows people down, that builds on shared heritage – that’s to be celebrated.

There’s also what looks to be a fascinating exhibition opening at Lakeside Arts in Nottingham in a couple of weeks



[lakesidearts.org.uk/exhibitions/event/5542/ancient-iraq-new-discoveries.html](http://lakesidearts.org.uk/exhibitions/event/5542/ancient-iraq-new-discoveries.html)



So back in Genesis, each tribe has its master, the man at the top – and Abram is that man. According to Scripture, Abram is 10 generations down from Noah – and God made a Covenant with Noah, a Covenant with a rainbow. Genesis 9 “And God said ‘This is the sign of the covenant I am making between Me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come. I

have set My rainbow in the clouds, and it will be a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth.” God is there with his people, there is life after the flood. We have spoken a lot about rainbows in the last two years – and found inspiration in them. (This one is from Chichester Cathedral)

You wonder whether, as the generations went on, as men and women travelled in the desert, whether they caught a glimpse of the rainbow in the water of an oasis, or in the sudden storm, and knew that God was with them.



Abram knew that God was with him. His story starts at the end of Genesis chapter 11 – why not settle down and read it sometime soon.

Terah was the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran was the father of Lot. Abram and Nahor took wives; the name of Abram’s wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor’s wife was Milcah. She was the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah. Now Sarai was barren; she had no child. Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram’s wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there.

God calls Abram

Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup>I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’



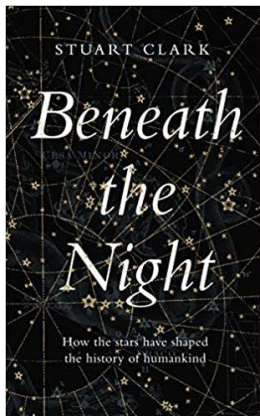
But Sarai, his wife, is barren. There is no child. Yet God continues to bless him, and promises him that he will have descendants. God sends Melchizedek, a King and Priest, to bless him. God is with him.

Then God sends Abram the vision we read about in today's Old Testament lesson. "I am your shield, your reward shall be very great." It's a lovely picture, the shield of God, protecting him from all – and no doubt, in his journeys, in his dealings with all the different tribes, no doubt there had been times when there had been battles, fights, and shields had surely been very necessary.

Abram knows how much he has, and yet there is one thing missing – I continue childless. Abram and Sarah had appointed a former slave to be their descendent, Eliezer of Damascus – apparently this was normal practice in that part of the world at that time.

Usually, of course, it is the woman who gets the blame for a lack of a child – but here Abram doesn't seem to be blaming his wife. God gets the blame – "you have given me no offspring". I learned a long time ago that you can tell God what you're unhappy about, what you think is unfair, you can shout at God if necessary.

God accepts the criticism, the sadness, the pain, the confusion – and God takes him outside. Look up, look towards heaven and count the stars, see if you are able to count them. "So shall your descendants be."



One of the other books I have read this week is this *Beneath the Night*, by Stuart Clark (Guardian Faber 2020). He traces the history of humanity's fascination with the night sky, from earliest times through to the images of Apollo, the Hubble space telescope and the Mars Voyager. He goes back to the Upper Paleolithic period, some 40,000 years ago – bone fragments scratched with a pattern that may be a calendar of the moon's phases. The earliest signs of what we might understand as religious observance, perhaps 10,000 BC. The first cities date to between 5,500 and 4,000 BC – and they existed in this area of Abraham, of Iraq –



and there are clay fragments dating to about 2,600 BC which seem to be the first religious texts (page 35 Kesh Temple Hymn). The city of Kesh and its temple are likened to the moon in the sky, a brilliant beacon against a dark backdrop. Abraham was not alone in looking up and being amazed – and he wasn't the first to see the hand of the divine in it all.

You know the story of Abraham – but it wouldn't do any of us any harm to sit with our bibles and re-read it. I have to hold on to the fact that he believed, and generations since continue to believe. For me, it is what gives me strength.

I am not alone in finding my strength in God. I give you this image – I don't know the source, I haven't checked it is accurate, but if this man believes, I know I can too.



Peter Barham, 12 March 2022