

Greater than Abraham. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 13 November 2013.

As you know, we are well on the way through a series of meditations which focus on the supreme 'greatness' of our Lord Jesus.

This week it falls to me to look with you briefly at the Saviour as 'greater than Abraham'. And my Bible reading comes from the close of chapter 8 of the Gospel according to John. We pick up the story when the Lord Jesus declared to the unbelieving Jews of His day: 'Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see (experience) death'.¹

And I should explain that our Lord was, of course, then referring, *not to physical* death, but to *spiritual and eternal* death.

But His hearers clearly misunderstood Him, and supposing that He spoke of natural, physical death, they objected, 'Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died?' Jesus answered, we read, 'Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad'. The Jews said to him, 'You are *not yet* fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?' Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am'. 'They therefore took up stones to throw at Him', the gospel says, 'but Jesus hid Himself and went out'.

And, as you will have guessed, my text for this morning consists of the question posed to our Lord by the Jews, 'Are you greater than our father Abraham?'

And there is no doubt that Abraham *was* a great man. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to say that he is one of the most remarkable men mentioned anywhere in the Bible. And Abraham was great in *many* ways.

He was great *nationally* ... great, that is, as *the great founding father* of the Jewish nation. When God first called Abraham to leave his home city of Ur – with all its idolatry – He (God) had promised him, 'I will make *of you* a great nation'.² And God had kept that promise. Through Abraham's immediate descendants – Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's sons – God had created the nation of Israel.³ Which is why, of course, the Jews in our reading today spoke of him – as they *often* did – as '*our father* Abraham'.

But he was great, not only nationally. He was great also *personally*. For example, he proved himself to be a man of immense courage ... on one occasion, to save the life of his nephew Lot, Abraham challenged the might of a powerful four-king confederacy from the north-east, having not many more than 300 trained servants at his command.⁴ But his courage was matched by his consideration for others – as witness the time when, to avoid any dispute or strife, he generously allowed his nephew – a much younger man – to choose whatever land he wanted in the area where they were both then dwelling.⁵

But Abraham was not only great nationally and personally. He was great also *spiritually*. He was known as a man of prayer – indeed, we owe to Abraham one of the greatest intercessory prayers in the Bible,⁶ prayed on behalf of his nephew Lot, *then* in danger of being caught up in the fiery destruction of Sodom, one of the notorious 'cities of the plain'.⁷ On a later occasion, the Lord Himself directed a Philistine king to take an action which would result in Abraham praying for him.⁸ Clearly, the prayers of this man, spoken of in scripture three times as God's 'friend'⁹ ... the prayers of this man counted for something.

But Abraham was distinguished mainly by his faith – for his was truly a colossal faith. He proved that he could trust God when he didn't know *where* – 'By faith', the New Testament says, 'Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out (to leave his home in sophisticated Ur of the Chaldees, that is) ... and he went out, *not knowing where he was going*'.¹⁰

Then he proved that he could trust God when he didn't know *how* – when God promised him that He (God) would bless him with a son, even though Abraham's wife Sarah was then well past the age when women conceive and bear children (and had, in any case, been barren all her life). In response to which promise, the scripture says, 'Abraham believed God', adding, 'and it was counted to him as righteousness'.¹¹

And, finally, and *most* remarkably, Abraham proved that he could trust God when he didn't know *why* – when (without any explanation) God confronted him with the demand that Abraham should slay and offer up his own son Isaac in sacrifice ... although, as we know, it never had been God's intention that Abraham should go through with this, but that He was simply testing the strength of Abraham's faith and obedience.

Yes ... Abraham trusted God on each occasion – when he didn't know *where*, when he didn't know *how*, and when he didn't know *why*. As I say, his was a *colossal* faith.

Abraham was most certainly a great man ... great nationally, personally, and spiritually. When God had first called on Abraham to leave his own country, He had promised him, 'I will bless you and *make your name great*'.¹² And God

was good to His word. Abraham's name certainly became great. Indeed, his name is mentioned well over 300 times in the Bible.¹³ O yes, on any score, Abraham was most certainly 'great'.

And yet it is clear from our reading this morning that the greatness of Abraham is totally eclipsed by that of One immeasurably greater.

As we noted earlier, the Jews readily acknowledged that their 'father Abraham' had 'died' ... and, being an ordinary mortal man, Abraham had remained well and truly dead.

But our Lord asserted, in effect, that *He* was no ordinary mortal man. Far from it. For, in His own words, 'before Abraham was' – before, that is, Abraham had even begun to exist some two thousand years previously – 'before Abraham was, I am'.

And I note that He did not say, as any angel of heaven could have said, 'before Abraham was, I was', but 'before Abraham was, I *am*' ... deliberately identifying Himself as the Self-existing One – as 'the God of Abraham ... Isaac ... and Jacob' – who had made Himself known to Moses at the burning bush, and who had then declared His name to be the 'I am'.¹⁴

Today, the 13th of November, happens to be the anniversary of the birth of Augustine, one of the so-called Church Fathers.¹⁵ Commenting on one of the Psalms, Augustine wrote, 'He who said, "Before Abraham was, I am" (was) not before Abraham only, but before Adam: not only before Adam, but before all the angels, (and) before heaven and earth'.¹⁶ How true! By using the divine name 'I am', Jesus declared that He existed not only before Abraham, but from eternity.

Make no mistake then, the Lord Jesus was – and is – infinitely greater than Abraham.

Such an unmistakable claim to full deity – to being God – met with a predictable response from His Jewish audience – 'they therefore took up stones to throw at Him'. 'But', we are told, 'Jesus hid Himself' ... for, as is said earlier in the same chapter, His 'hour (the hour of His death, that is) had not yet come' – which death, when His hour *did* come, was to be, not by stoning, but by crucifixion.

Earlier, I referred in passing to Abraham's proven willingness to offer up his son Isaac in sacrifice – which, in the event, he was neither *required* nor *permitted* by God to do. But although *then*, on Mount Moriah, God stepped in just in time to spare Abraham's son, Jesus knew that the hour was soon to come when, at Golgotha, God would not spare *Him* ... when, as the apostle Paul once expressed it, He (God) 'did not spare *His own Son* but delivered Him up for us all'.¹⁷

Footnotes

¹ John 8. 51.

² Acts 7. 2-3 with Gen. 12. 1-2.

³ Cf. Isa. 51. 2.

⁴ He had 318 trained servants – trained no doubt in the use of weapons. He also had help from a few allies, Gen. 14. 24.

⁵ Gen. 13. 7-9.

⁶ Gen. 18. 16-33.

⁷ Gen. 13. 12

⁸ Gen. 20. 7.

⁹ 2 Chron. 20. 7; Isa. 41. 8; James 2. 23.

¹⁰ Heb. 11. 8.

¹¹ Rom. 4. 3.

¹² Gen. 12. 2.

¹³ In all, 312 times. 'Abram' 62 times in the Old Testament, and 'Abraham' 175 times in the Old Testament and 75 times in the New Testament.

¹⁴ Exod. 3. 13-15.

¹⁵ 13 November 354.

¹⁶ *Exposition on the Book of Psalms* ... Psalm 93, paragraph 5.

See ... <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf108.ii.XCIII.html>

¹⁷ Rom. 8. 32.