

Hymn

STF 91 *The God of Abraham praise*

Prayers

[Weybridge Zoom service use adoration and confession from MHA Sunday]

Glory be to you, O God.

Glory be to you.

Glory be to you, O Father.

Glory be to you.

Glory be to you, O Son.

Glory be to you.

Glory be to you, O Spirit.

Glory be to you.

Glory be to you, O God.

Glory be to you.¹

Reading(s)

*[Weybridge Zoom service has Genesis 18:1-15 and Matthew 9:35-10:8;
YouTube service only has Genesis.]*

[SLIDE 1]

[Genesis 18:1-15](#)

Our story from Genesis has had a significant effect on Christian art and worship since the fifteenth century AD. For at that time, the Russian artist Andrei Rublev painted an icon based on this story. Here it is:

[SLIDE 2]



Here are the three men who visited Abraham and Sarah. They are sitting in front of an oak tree from Mamre – you can see it behind the central figure. And over to the right is the nearby Mount Moriah.

But – to Rublev, these weren't simply three men. They are not simply painted as men, but as heavenly beings. Look closely, and you can see the angelic wings. Even more than that, their hands are extended in blessing the cup that is on the table. They are not just heavenly beings, but divine. To Rublev, and to many Christians who have read this story, they are the Holy Trinity.

When Abraham encounters them, they are merely strangers who to him have appeared out of nowhere. It is the narrator of the story who tells us, the readers, that 'The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre' (verse 1). Abraham doesn't know that at first. He simply offers them Middle Eastern hospitality.

That hospitality begins conventionally, with the opportunity for the travellers to rest in the shade of a tree and have water to clean and refresh their feet (verse 4).

But then it goes up a notch. Abraham offers 'a little bread' (verse 5). However, what he serves up is far more than that. You may have come across hosts at dinner parties whose words suggest they are only going to offer something modest, but then they lay on a feast. Abraham is like that. And in using 'choice flour' (verse 6) and 'a calf, tender and good' (verse 7) he is using the top-quality ingredients that would, some centuries later, be specified for offerings and sacrifices. Abraham doesn't know that, of course: 'he is behaving more wisely than he realised.'²

Only as the narrative continues to its climax do Abraham and Sarah implicitly recognise that it is the Lord who has visited them. It's hard not to think of the injunction in the Epistle to the Hebrews chapter 13, verse 2, which says,

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

What should we make of this?

[SLIDE 3]

The Christian author, speaker, and charity campaigner Krish Kandiah wrote a book called 'God Is Stranger'. God has turned up here as a stranger, and his ways are stranger than Abraham is used to – or indeed, we are, either.

And yet one of those ways of his which can be strange to us is that he is at work in the ordinary, as much as he is in the spectacular. We may long for signs and wonders, great miracles

that will strengthen our faith and make us exclaim 'Wow!', but at the oaks of Mamre God the stranger works through the ordinary incident of wandering men being given generous Middle Eastern hospitality. And he does this to underline that the time is coming close for something to happen which is significant to his purposes for the world – fulfilling his longstanding promise that Abraham and Sarah will have descendants, and that through them he will bless the world.

In the French novel *The Diary Of A Country Priest* by Georges Bernanos, the titular priest is a young curate who at the end of the story is dying of stomach cancer. Another priest is assigned to come and give him the Last Rites, but he has not arrived. We discover what happens from a letter written by the friend who was with him at the end:

The priest was still on his way, and finally I was bound to voice my regret that such delay threatened to deprive my comrade of the final consolations of our church. He did not seem to hear me. But a few moments later, he put his hand over mine and his eyes entreated me to draw closer to him. He then uttered these words almost in my ear. I am quite sure I have recorded them accurately, for his voice, though halting, was strangely distinct.

'Does it matter? Grace is everywhere...'

I think he died just then.³

[SLIDE 4]

And that's the thing: grace is everywhere. As we dwell by the oaks of Mamre with Abraham and Sarah, we learn that ordinary life is not necessarily ordinary. It is a place where we may be alert to the presence, the voice, and the actions of God himself.

When we leave this remote act of worship, we will return to a world that we often treat as mundane. However, we can be attentive to the presence and work of the divine there, just as much as in worship.

When the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote his famous words, 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God,' we should not limit that to the

most beautiful displays of creation. It should open us to the God who comes disguised as a stranger to meet us in the ordinary and reveal his purposes to us there.

[SLIDE 5]

But if that's the main thing I want to share with you today, to be alert to God in disguise working in his world, I also want to point you to one particular aspect of his character that we discover.

We remember that this isn't Abraham and Sarah's first encounter with God. It isn't even the first time the Lord has promised a child to them. This is simply the most specific - 'I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son' in verse 10 is translated in other Bibles, 'I will return to you next year'.

However, this visit is very pastoral in its tone. Sarah laughs inside her tent. Gently, she is challenged, and she goes on the defensive, denying that she laughed. But the Lord says, 'Oh yes, you did laugh' (verses 13-15) The text says Sarah was afraid – was she afraid to get her hopes up after years of disappointment? The Lord doesn't dodge that and of course he also says, 'Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?' (verse 14)

It all comes across as the gentlest of rebukes. Yes, Abraham and Sarah have had more than their fair share of disappointment. There is the question of whether they believe that God can do the most wonderful of things, but this exchange has the flavour of God saying to them, I know you've had your hopes dashed over so many years, but pick yourself up once more and believe in what I can do.

[SLIDE 6]

Disappointment in the Christian life can take so many forms. For me, so many of my hopes and dreams when I entered the ministry have not been fulfilled. I imagine that some of you too have found that the hopes you cherished when you were younger for your working life or your family have not come to fruition.

If so, perhaps you need to meet God quietly, as he disguises himself in everyday life, rather than in some spectacular laser light show of signs and wonders.

Think of the prophet Elijah, running for his life in fear of Queen Jezebel after he had destroyed the prophets of Baal. He comes to the mountain of God, exhausted and hungry. God provides no miracle but food. And God speaks not in the earthquake, not in the wind, and nor in the fire. He speaks after the fire in a still, small voice.

[SLIDE 7]

If you are struggling to keep going because your hopes have come to nothing over the years, might God be readying himself to speak to you quietly, restoring your faith? And might he do it in a surprising place – disguised in everyday life, rather than in a church service?

Intercessions

[Weybridge Zoom service uses MHA Sunday intercessions]

That the barriers that divide us may be broken down,
Lord have mercy.

That we may live in unity, peace, and concord,
Lord, have mercy.

That we may come to mutual understanding and care,
Lord, have mercy.

Upon all who suffer from dissensions and quarrels,
Christ, have mercy.

Upon all who are torn apart by war and by violence,
Christ, have mercy.

Upon all who are divided in their loyalty and love,
Christ, have mercy.

That all who work for unity may be blessed,
Lord, have mercy.

That all who heal divisions may have hope,
Lord, have mercy.

That all who lead nations may seek peace,
Lord, have mercy.⁴

Our Father ...

Hymn

STF 156 *From the breaking of the dawn (I will stand on every promise of your Word)*

Blessing

God be in my head, and in my understanding.

God be in my eyes, and in my looking.

God be in my mouth, and in my speaking.

God be in my heart, and in my thinking.

God be at my end, and at my departing.⁵

The Lord enrich us with his grace, and further us with his heavenly blessing;
the Lord defend us in adversity, and keep us from all evil;
the Lord receive our prayers, and graciously absolve us from our offences.⁶

And the blessing of God,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be with you now and always.

Amen.

¹ David Adam, *The Rhythm Of Life*, p89.

² Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, p47.

³ Quoted in Michael Frost, *Seeing God In The Ordinary*, pp x-xi.

⁴ David Adam, *op. cit.*, p91f.

⁵ *Sarum Primer* in Adam, p92.

⁶ *GreLgorian Sacramentary* in Adam, p92.