

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

(Hebrews 11:8-10)

What is God calling you to do? Isn't it a basic question for Christians?

- It is a basic question for Christians but not necessarily one that today's Christians try to answer
- But there is another basic question too: where is God calling you to go?
- It is a basic question for Christians but not necessarily one that today's Christians try to answer

So what is God calling you to do? I think if pressed that we would answer in this way

- He is calling me to be a local preacher, a steward, a treasurer, a pastoral visitor – and so on
- I think that is fair enough – we need people in the life of the church who are called to do things
- And my general rule would be, if you do not feel that God is calling you to do, don't do it

And where is God calling you to go? This sounds as if it belongs at an old-fashioned Missionary Rally

- The preacher has read the text, 'the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few'
- And, in giving the call for men and women to serve as missionaries in distant lands
- Has asked if God is calling them to go to China, India, Africa, South America, some distant land

For many of today's Christians what I call 'basic questions' have, in fact, become very difficult questions

- What is God calling you to do? Often the best we can hope for is that he is calling us to fulfil a role
- Where is God calling you to go? Often the best we can hope for is that he is calling us to stay here

It could be that I wasn't listening but it is only recently I have become aware of the 'spiritual journey'

- The idea is not all bad of course but these days everyone seems to be on some kind of spiritual journey
- Which seems to mean the natural progression of a person, understanding god, the world, and ourselves
- A song which sees life in this way is Sydney Carter's 'One more step along the world I go'
- A song that I definitely would not be selecting for *Desert Island Discs* – apart from the poor poetry
- (E.g. 'As I travel through the bad and good, keep me travelling the way I should') it seems to me
- That though we can cheer it up by putting our own backdrop, the song is not adequately expressing faith
- In the way, for example, that we might see it expressed in another journey, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*
- But back to the original questions, What is God calling you to do? Where is God calling you to go?

'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am' (The words of the Lord Jesus, John 14:1-3)

What is God calling you to do? Trust him. Where is God calling you to go? To the place he will show you

- 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you'
- These were the words that God spoke to Abram (later Abraham) (Gen.12:1)
- Now in Hebrews 11 more space is given to Abraham than to any of the other men and women of faith
- Abraham has already appeared in the letter (Heb. 6:13-15) as an example of faith and patience
- The promises given to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3) are fundamental to our understanding of faith
- In the NT, Abraham is seen as the father of all who have faith (Heb. 2:16)
- Abram was living in Haran when God called him to go to a place he would inherit but had not yet seen

I THE SEEN TO THE UNSEEN

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

The OT says, ‘The Lord said to Abram, ‘Leave your country, your people and your father’s household’

- ‘So Abram left, as the LORD had told him’ (Gen. 12:4). It reminds me of the call of the first disciples
- Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him (Matt. 4:21-22)
- If we read the Bible carelessly, we make believers in the OT and NT into gullible fools
- Abram did not leave Haran on a whim, he left because God had promised him something unseen
- That he would be made into a great nation, God would bless him, God would make his name great
- And that all peoples of the earth would be blessed through him
- In the NT, Peter and Andrew, James and John did not leave their nets on a whim, but because of a vision
- The vision that Jesus had set before them was one of the ‘kingdom of heaven’
- When Abraham and the disciples set out, they did not know the answers to everything - but they trusted
- And in doing so they exchanged the seen world of former days for the unseen inheritance

Abraham trusted the God who speaks, the disciples trusted the God who speaks (in Jesus)

- It is wrong to understand faith as inactive: Abraham showed faith by eagerly doing what God commanded
- Abraham went out knowing that it was right to do so but not knowing where it would all lead
- The emphasis is on the relationship between faith and obedience
- For Abraham, faith meant stepping out into the unknown, leaving behind the security of the familiar
- This is the foundation of the great doctrine of justification by faith alone – he trusted God

II THE IMMEDIATE TO THE ULTIMATE

By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.

I don't know if it is the same for you but it is question that I am asked frequently

- 'do you know where you are going?' Often it is in a large public building like hospital that I am asked
- And, wearing the dog-collar, I nearly always answer, 'immediately or ultimately?'
- To me, it is one of the mysteries of modern-living that people seem to think so little about their destiny
- To many people today 'destiny' is a computer game where the player shoots aliens to save humanity
- More seriously, it is events that will necessarily happen to a particular person or thing in the future

Abraham received the promises of God for his destiny – in response he began living a life of faith

- He left the immediate in the hope of the ultimate, of which the land of Canaan was a sign
- For in Canaan, it was revealed that though this was the land of his inheritance
- Even here was not his permanent residence, for he was only a sojourner, living in a tent in a foreign land
- Abraham left the land he knew and went to an unknown land because he relied on the Word of God
- The writer to the Hebrews sees faith as nothing other than relying on the Word of God
- Through the faith of one man, a community of faith was born – a reminder that our faith is not in isolation

In the New Testament, Peter will speak of the people of God as being 'strangers in the world' (1 Peter 1:1)

- This was true of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in Canaan – it is true of believers today
- We have a change in focus from the seen to the unseen, from the immediate to the ultimate, from:

III THE TRANSIENT TO THE PERMANENT

For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

You know that I maintain that I learned the basics of the Christian faith before I was seven years old

- It's probably partly true and partly preacher's hyperbole (dramatic overstatement) but I knew this song
- God has given us a book full of stories, which was made for his people of old
- It begins with the tale of a garden and ends with a city of gold.
- The city of gold is a reference to Revelation, where in John's vision of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:21)
- the twelve gates were twelve pearls; ... and the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass
- I think we are not meant to understand this literally – but metaphorically
- The city is a common biblical picture referring to a place where men and women live with God
- To cultured men and women in the first century, the city was the highest form of civilisation
- And this is no ordinary city for its architect and builder is God himself
- While the tent must be the most mobile form of shelter, this is a city with permanent foundations
- By faith, Abraham was looking for permanence in something other than the material
- He did not set out to build a house, let alone a city in the promised land – faith trusts God's promises
- And concludes, the ultimate reality is not what I see but what God says

Abraham was a person of great faith – that does not mean that he was super-human and certainly not infallible

- The lengthy narrative in Genesis shows that he made mistakes (some mistakes he made more than once)
- Indicating that God calls flawed human beings to respond to him in repentance and faith
- And to live for him. When things go wrong, we renew our focus not on the transient but the permanent

A challenging question is how would we live today if we believed absolutely that God existed and loved us?

- How would we live if we believed he cared about every action and concern and wished only to reward us?
- There are some fervent Christians who might be confident enough to say, ‘much the same as I do now’
- But then we could ask the question from another perspective
- How would we live today if we did not believe that God even existed, let alone loved us?
- How would we live if we believed that there was no God to care what we did, let alone reward us?
- Professor George H. Guthrie at Union University, Jackson, Tennessee, writes:

If all I am and have and do differs little from my unbelieving neighbour, then I have embraced his world and his values and fool myself by saying I am living for another world and kingdom values. My life must be radically different in what I embrace—the values of a heavenly kingdom.

Abraham trusted God and went to the place that God commanded – he exchanged the seen for the unseen

- He lived as an alien, a tent-dweller in the land of promise – he exchanged the immediate for the ultimate
- His focus was on the blessing of God’s promise – he exchanged the transient for the permanent
- For Abraham, as for the other men and women of the faith, faith did not focus on God’s goodness
- It was not about how much or how little you believed, it was not about taking a blind leap
- It was not about practising the faith in reflective devotion – it was about trusting God
- And responding in confident action – and the people we read about were real people, faith, flaws and all
- Faith does not mean that everything works out well, certainly not all the time
- When Jesus called the disciples to follow him, he reminded them it was about taking up their cross
- But the end is not death, because the way of the cross is the way to life eternal – to the city with God