

## Address by Ash Leighton Plom for 24th July 2022 at St David's Church

Prayer: Lord, by your grace help us persevere in bold and faithful prayer, and in your commission to each of us to teach others your ways. Amen.

I want to look at two things this morning, principally grace and prayer, because our first reading was actually all about grace, and both the readings teach us about prayer, and to persevere in prayer.

Let's address the Genesis reading mainly, because that one might seem a little problematic, and I want to consider that. To 21st Century Western sensibilities, readings like that section of Genesis can seem shocking – but the irony is the original audience would actually have felt shock and amazement for essentially the opposite reasons to us, because of our respective cultures.

Pagan people in the Ancient Near East generally didn't have a concept of God as loving and merciful, but rather accepted that gods were distant, or punitive, or capricious, and either thwarted humans for failing to worship them well enough, or just didn't care when they accidentally destroyed our cities, crops, families, and so on in the course of their wars and backstabbing, because they just weren't really mindful of humans.

So, the shock of this passage, like so much of Genesis, is actually that God cares enough about victims to seek justice, rather than exhibiting the chaotic capricious behaviour of pagan gods. And even more, that he cares enough about people to consult with us and invite us into his counsel and listen to our feelings.

You might share something like that the next time someone asks you if the God of the New Testament and the Old Testament are different gods. I had a conversation with one of the dads at the school-run breakfast drop-in about this recently as he'd been impressed to find that commands like, "act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly" are from the Old Testament, which shows God's goodness and mercy in the Old Testament. I pointed out that throwing tables over to chase off greedily corrupt money-grubbers is also the sort of thing we see Jesus doing, so God in the New Testament isn't always meek and mild, but active in his pursuit of justice.

The reading from Genesis can be used as an example of this, then, as it shows God surprising cultural expectations at the time by caring about justice, caring about mercy, caring about humans.

We don't know exactly what the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was, but we do know the outcry of their victims was "very great", and that this provoked God to action.

I love the little details like where it says he will "go down and see" (Gen. 18.21), not as if there's anything God doesn't see, but again in reply to voices in the culture that said God or the gods were blind to injustice. Scriptures like this are a dialogue against that allegation, asserting instead that he cares enough to see. It also shows his actions are based on knowledge, and not arbitrary, so the text is responding to criticisms about God or the gods as being unjust and arbitrary.

In an Ancient Near East context, this is amazing, to suggest that God is like a just judge who investigates and decides with care and diligence. It also sets a standard for kings and judges, who at the time generally thought laws existed mainly to keep them in power, rather than for the protection of victims.

It would be amazing, too, for the original audience, that God would disclose his plans to a human, in this case Abraham, and allow him to be his counsellor. We're so used to these concepts now that they don't shock us, but the scripture was literally introducing these concepts to society and they were a shock.

Phenomenally, God consults with Abraham because, improbably, they're friends, also an unheard of concept in the Ancient Near East. God even gives Abraham the job of teaching his ways to others - in verse 19 God says of Abraham "he will direct" others. We share in these privileges and responsibilities - of friendship with God, and introducing others to him and his ways.

This is amazing grace.

Now on to prayer: Abraham prays with deep humility. He seems to have a profound sense of his unworthiness, a mere human before an awesome God, very much in keeping with his Ancient Near East culture, saying things like "though I am nothing but dust" (Gen. 18.27). And yet, he shows this awesome confidence to draw near with faith, in assurance of this friendship with God. Proverbs 15.8 even says our prayers "please" God. But I think Abraham prays in the assurance of God's goodness, too. He says, "the Judge of the earth will do right". This is the key revelation the passage is proclaiming: God does what is right, unlike the flighty or violent gods of surrounding pagan culture.

Abraham thus prays with grace-filled charity: no doubt he recognised with God that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was very great, but he asks God's grace for them. As

bad as they were, he sought the best for them. So we too can boldly approach the throne of grace, no matter our sins, and this friendship God offers is wondrously available (c.f. e.g. 2 Sam. 7.18).