

Genesis 12:1-3 LCJE Jerusalem 2015

It is a pleasure to be here. I was first called to be involved in Jewish evangelism in 1962. Rosemary and I served for 5 years in Ethiopia among the Falasha Jews. Later we worked among Jewish students in the UK, during that time we got to know a bright Jewish student called Richard Harvey. It has been a joy to be involved in the birth of LCJE and it is thrilling to see the way it has grown and developed over the years as one of the most significant outcomes of the Lausanne movement.

The theme of our conference is “Jerusalem and back: an unchanging gospel.” It seems appropriate to begin our conference by reflecting on the call of Abraham and God’s declared intention to bring blessing to the world.

Let us remind ourselves of the context of the call. Genesis 12 is preceded by 11 chapters which tell the story of the creation of the world and the impact of sin in that world. We see the impact of sin on the individual, as Adam and Eve are driven from the garden and are condemned to die. Dust you are and to dust you shall return. We see the impact of sin on the family as Cain kills his brother and is condemned to go from the presence of the Lord. We see the impact of sin in society with increasing corruption, oppression and immorality. God sees that the thoughts of mankind are only evil continually. God destroys the human race, graciously sparing only Noah and his family. We see the impact of sin among all the nations that gather together at Babel to make a tower to reach up to heaven. God comes down in judgement and scatters the nations across the face of the earth.

One scene after another in these chapters depicts the devastating impact of sin on the individual, on the family, in society and in every nation. Here is the biblical analysis of what is wrong in the world. Here is the scriptural explanation of what is the biggest problem of the human race. We have decided to do our own thing, to go our own way, to ignore the commands of a gentle loving God, and we all now stand condemned before him and under his judgement. All the nations lie under judgement. That is the problem that confronts us at the end of chapter 11. Here in chapter 12 is the beginning of the solution. All the nations will be blessed.

That is the context in which Abraham was called. Today it remains the context in which you and I have been called. We have been called to faith in the Messiah. The world is still under judgement. The peoples of the world are still wandering, helpless and hopeless as sheep without a shepherd. They are still separated from the presence of the God who loves them, driven by their inherited nature and by their own wilfulness. They are still at war with themselves and with each other. They are divided among themselves. We can still see the impact of sin in the lives of individuals, in the family, in society and in every nation. The human race remains under the judgement of God. The greatest need of our world is not for moral guidance, or for purpose for living or for greater happiness or person fulfilment. It is for salvation. It is for deliverance from

the wrath and judgment of God. Here is the context in which Abraham is called and in which you and I are also called.

Notice secondly the basis of God's call to Abraham. Here is the man with whom God will make his covenant. Here is the man God calls to be the father of the chosen people and the ancestor of the saviour of the world. Here is the man who will be called the friend of God. So from all the people alive at the time, why did God choose him?

Was it because he came from a good religious family? Ur was the centre for the worship of the Moon god. According to the rabbis his father worshipped idols.

Was it because he was a man of great integrity? He was undoubtedly a good man but he had his moments of weakness, when his standards dropped, and he cared more for himself than wife.

Was it because he was a man of great faith? Sometimes but there were times when his trust in God's promise grew a bit thin and Abraham resorted to working out own solution rather than waiting for God's time.

There was no compelling reason why God called this man. There is no compelling reason why God has called you or me. The basis of his call and ours has nothing to do with merit or worthiness on our part. It is all to do with God's grace. You have not chosen me but I have chosen you that you may go and bear fruit (John 15:6). God chose Jeremiah before he was born: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you. Before you were born I appointed you a prophet to the nations." God exhibits a tendency to choose those who are weak and recognise their own limitations. That should keep us humble. That should also stop us from feeling inadequate. By grace you have been saved through faith, and this not from yourselves. It is the gift of God. Here is the unchanging gospel. Here is the good news we have to share from Jerusalem to the ends of the world and back.

Thirdly notice the demands of Gods' call. They were very simple. They were contained in one word: "Go" – God demanded his obedience. That obedience was very costly. Abraham had to leave his home, his country, his wider family and his friends. In 17 God says to Abraham: "Walk before me and be blameless." Many years later Jesus would tell the disciples: "If you love me, keep my commandments."

God demands our obedience and our holiness. God is more interested in our obedience than our ministry. God demands our sacrifice. Abraham was asked to leave his country, his people and his father's house. For many of us, perhaps for all of us, following Jesus has meant sacrifice, loss, rejection. "If you would be my disciple you must be willing to take up your cross daily and follow me." Doubtless over this week we shall be reminded of those who have paid a great price to follow Jesus. May that encourage us when we find the going hard and the price too high.

Fourthly, notice the promise, the sevenfold blessing that God declares to Abraham. He chose to bless Abraham and his family, to give him a land, to make him into a great nation, to make his name famous, to surround him with God's blessing and protection. We rejoice in the goodness of God and we rejoice that the gift and calling of God are irrevocable. But the climax of the sevenfold blessing comes at the end. Through him every nation on earth would be blessed. This is a pivotal statement in the book of Genesis. These words are repeated five times in the Patriarchal stories, first to Abraham, then to Isaac and then to Jacob. Here is the answer to the dilemma we saw at the end of chapter 11. All the nations are under judgement. Here is God's answer to that dilemma. All the nations shall be blessed. God chose this man and this nation because he wanted to reach all nations. He had to start somewhere. He did not choose one of the great civilisations of the world. He chose a wandering nomad and a bunch of slaves. But his purpose, his intention through them was to bring the blessing of salvation to the world.

It was through this family and from this land that God would bring blessing to the world. He chose this nation to be a light to the nations, to be a holy nation, to reflect the character of the God they worshipped. He chose this land from which that light would shine. In the fullness of time he brought them to that land and in that Land David built his capital in Jerusalem.

David understood the heart of God. David longed for all the nations to worship Him, and in the Psalms he called on all the peoples of the world to praise him. Solomon prayed that people from all over the world would come not to the Temple in Jerusalem, not to be impressed by its architecture, but to worship the true God. Many of the prophets understood that God loves all peoples and wanted all to find his salvation. Isaiah declares: "Turn to me and be saved all you nations of the world, for I am God and there is no other." Habakkuk proclaims: "The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

In the fullness of time, God his Son to be the Saviour not just of the house of Israel but of the whole world. "Other sheep I have," said Jesus, "who are not of this fold. Them also I must bring and there will be one fold and one shepherd." Or again: "If I be lifted up I will draw all people unto me." And when he had died on the cross for our salvation and when he had risen again he sent out his disciples to take the good news into the world, beginning in Jerusalem.

The spread of the gospel from Jerusalem: So the unchanging gospel spread from Jerusalem through Judaea, into Samaria – that was huge cultural jump – then to Gentiles, the Ethiopia Eunuch and the Roman Cornelius. So on through the Eastern Mediterranean as this Asian religion crossed into Europe, and across the Roman world.

Slowly it spread across Europe and beyond. But progress was steady but slow. By the beginning of the nineteenth century Christianity was largely confined to Europe and the East coast of America. Then in the great century of gospel progress, the good news of Jesus was taken into almost every corner of the globe. The last hundred years have witnessed exponential growth. Here is the fulfilment of the

promise to Abraham. Through you all the nations shall be blessed. The gospel that spread out from Jerusalem has reached the ends of the earth.

60 years ago some expressed the fear that the church in Africa would disappear, eliminated between the twin forces of Islam and communism. The church in Africa has not disappeared. 450 million African Christians claim to be Christian. We were in Nigeria some years ago in the city of Ibadan with the Anglican Bishop of Ibadan. He invited me to preach at the dedication of a new church. The church was called the Ambassadors for Christ Evangelical Anglican Church. The church had only started less than a year before with a handful of Christians meeting in a shed. Now there was a congregation of more than a thousand, singing and worshipping God as only Africans can. I asked the Bishop if he had seen any other churches grow so quickly. To which he replied that this was the fourth Anglican church like this to be planted in this city in the past year. The blessing of Abraham has come to the continent of Africa.

60 years ago the church in China number less than 1 million protestant believers. During the Cultural Revolution the church in China went through a terrible time of persecution. Again many feared for its very survival. But the church did not die. Through that persecution and since the Church has witnessed huge growth. It is difficult to obtain exact numbers but according to the Times of London there may be as many as 130 million Christians in China. By 2030 there will be more Christians in China than in the USA. The blessing of Abraham has been poured out in the great country of China.

The blessing of Abraham is reaching the Muslim people also in Iran, North Africa, Bangladesh. In his book 'A wind in the house of Islam' David Garrison points out how in one region after another in the Muslim world there are significant movements of Muslims to faith in Christ. He cites 70 locations in 29 countries where there is a movement of Muslims to faith in Jesus. He defines a movement as at least 100 fellowship and at least 1,000 baptised believers. One may question his figures and yet it is undoubtedly true that more Muslims have come to faith in Jesus in the last twenty years.

This is great news for which we give thanks to God. And yet these numbers are so small. If two or even seven million Muslims have come to faith there remain 1.6 billion who have not. Even if there are 100 million Christians in China, there are 1.2 billion who have not. Even if there are 450 million Christians in Africa, the faith of many is nominal or superficial. The gospel may have gone out from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth but there remain so many areas of the world untouched by that gospel. One of the darkest areas is the land between China and Jerusalem. The gospel that went out from this city has to return to this city to reach all those who have as yet never heard. **The spread of the gospel back to Jerusalem.**

Many of you will have heard of the Back to Jerusalem movement that has arisen in China. Christians in China have a concern to spread the gospel to those who have

never heard. They know that the gospel started in Jerusalem and then spread in a generally westward direction into North Africa and Europe. Throughout history it has continued to spread westward around the globe, with China as its farthest advance. With a Chinese mindset, they see that to fulfill the Great Commission is to encircle the whole globe with the gospel, until it goes back even to where it began. Their aim is to reach all the countries and unreached people groups between China and Jerusalem, the Muslims, the Hindus, and the Buddhists, who have remained largely untouched by the gospel. Travelling along the old Silk Road, which once brought trade from the Middle East to China, they aim to reach 5,200 unreached people groups and tribes.

Later this year I shall be meeting with 1,000 pastors from mainland China. They have a particular love for Israel and the Jewish people. They have a burden to spread the good news of Jesus not only among the Han Chinese and the many minority groups in China but also to send out missionaries along the Silk Road back to Jerusalem.

The theme of our conference is “Jerusalem and back: an unchanging gospel” and our focus is reaching Jewish people with the gospel of Yeshua. It is an unchanging gospel, a gospel of grace. The only reason we can be here is because we are saved by his undeserved yet limitless grace. We rejoice that the gospel has gone to the far corners of the earth and we pray that it will come full circle back to Jerusalem and reach those who have never heard. It is a gospel for all the nations. One day we shall stand around a great throne with a great multitude that no one can number, from every nation, from every tribe and people and language and we shall cry: “Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Rev. Dr C David Harley