

A better country?

Genesis 15:1-6

Hebrews 11:1-3; 8-16

Luke 12:32-40

All Saints Kings Heath, Sunday 7th August 2022

(the day before Jenny and David's 30th Anniversary)

Infertility is a striking theme in the Bible, not always handled as tenderly as we might wish. Sarah, Hannah, Rebecca, Elizabeth, all lived with the anguish, frustration and appallingly imposed shame. As in some cultures to this day, it's assumed the woman is the one with has the problem. If we can hold the sensitivities around this carefully, Biblically we notice the significance of the offspring that are eventually born in each case: Isaac, Samuel, Joseph, John the Baptist. Theologically, the purpose of the emphasis on difficult conception and divine intervention is to disarm the male, and ensure he cannot take all the credit for the game changing life that begins. It is to emphasise that the child's vocation is from God.

Abram is a very prosperous man, and has just won major battles. It doesn't get more manly than that. But he lacks an heir and gazes at the stars feeling God's absurd promise that he will become a father even in old age. He pushes back with questions, but chooses to trust; he chooses to shape his life around this mysterious but un-ignorable God, and to trust the world can be even bigger and more interesting than it already is.

A medical couple I know began to imagine that the world could be different for couples struggling to conceive. They began to explore new and exciting ways in which couples living with infertility could be helped. They became pioneers in the field, creating a world-leading department.

They had the imagination to realise it was not only a mechanistic, scientific process involving lab equipment, pipets, probes and micro surgery, but that counselling should be on offer as part of the whole journey. Notably, some of the people who were unable to conceive with their help still wanted to stay in touch such was their gratitude.

They had the imagination to see it need not be only heterosexual couples that have the right to be helped on the journey to parenthood and opened the treatment to all.

As the field developed it became potentially quite lucrative in private medicine. You can imagine the potential emotional premium on such treatment. As a clinic among the best in the world, you can imagine private clients came their way, but, firmly. establishing university and NHS work, every penny of the private income went into a research fund to further the ground breaking work.

They had the imagination not only to pursue the work in this country but to equip surgeons, nurses and universities in the developing world to make progress in the field.

Come 65, stopping operating, they could have put their feet up, knowing the number of human lives that had begun because of their work were many, perhaps not as many as the stars Abram saw, but many. Now, though, the work changed, using all the contacts built up over the years, navigating international education and healthcare politics to develop a way of providing low cost IVF in the developing world. Intriguingly, that low cost care might come to Britain, unsettling

some in the medical establishment who have perhaps come to see the high fees for treatment as an entitlement.

But that's the thing with this couple. As that research fund shows, there was never a sense of entitlement. Knowledge is to be shared, not possessed. Contacts and reputation are to be used, but for others' flourishing. Vision and innovation was not for self aggrandisement – others have the titles and TV shows - it was for the sharing of good medicine, good practice, good news. Dreaming that the medical world could be better, pursuing things others could not see, but for the benefit of others, they are an unwitting example of the kinds of vision the writer of Hebrews remembered in Abram, and the kind of freedom of heart and mind Jesus encourages with his warmth, then sharp wit in his teaching about the health of the human heart.

He reveals to us our anxiety about people taking things off us. "Do not worry, my little flock," he says. "Give things away to help others flourish, then you needn't worry about either the wilful human threat of a thief, or about the chaotic threat of natural disaster, represented by the moth. Whatever the Roman government or wicked people or chaotic accident want to take off you, nothing can destroy the relationships you build with generosity." In that short passage, Jesus gives agency to the person who feels helpless with the fear of being broken into.

He then develops a parable to encourage an even greater sense of agency, bizarrely by casting us as slaves. Slaves have no power, no money and little choice. But they have one choice: to be ready, to take the initiative to work well not badly. Hidden in this parable is a tease about our attitude to God: that we assume he is a master easily displeased and we have no power or influence. In this little cameo, Jesus casts God as a master who eagerly sets about serving his servants in gratitude for their devotion. So he blows away any sense of oppression in our relationship with God. Then comes the surprise comedic twist.

We have imagined possession as source of anxiety (the fear of loss) and it has been transformed by our choosing to give things away, so possession became an opportunity for generosity and connection.

Then, we imagined keeping awake out of eagerness for God's return, being his willing servants, powerless, but curiously with the dignity of moral agency and contentment.

Now he asks us to imagine being awake and watchful, not as powerless slave but as prosperous house owner, this time anxious about a thief – God – breaking in to their well-defended life. Who is freer, the non-anxious person who gives things away, the slave who chooses willingly to be ready, or the supposed free property owner who thinks God is going to take things off him?

Casting God as a thief is to make us reflect on how fearful we are that God wants to take things off us and make our world smaller; duller.

I wonder, which are we? What kind of anxiety embattles our heart? If we are more prosperous like that house owner, pretty much in control of life, we are likely not to be so keen on God's return. That said, Jesus is not unkind to us. He teases us into recognising how we want to keep God out, but remember, Abram himself was very prosperous and very successful in worldly terms. Jesus dined with many prosperous people as well as outcasts. It could be said that the couple I began with are well educated and in control of much. But like Abram they show how still the

vision does not need to be selfish, the imagination can range daringly, ambitious for the flourishing of others.

They were also fortunate to be able to have children of their own. I have to say, I am very glad because one of them is Jenny, with whom I've been married thirty years tomorrow.

I risk a self-indulgent aside, because how it goes for us has an impact on you. If there is anything half useful in what I do for you, or am for you, it is in very large part because of Jenny. Her evolving, deepening faith and contribution to church life as an intelligent, compassionate, independent minded woman reminds me how serious and precious your evolving faith, commitment and gifts are; her companionship lends me confidence; the room she gives for the confidences held honours you; the space for recovery and introspection, the absorption of moods and the space she makes for the hidden costs of ministry allows for healthy assimilation of often quite awesome things, like your love, or grief. The playful reassurance of sex helps tune the voice and restore perspective. The sharing of parenthood helps me hold and enjoy that ridiculous responsibility. That is something I want to celebrate, but not in a mood of self congratulation. For in giving thanks for all that, I want to honour single colleagues who are so often far more gracious, able priests than I am. I honour the magnificent single parents who can't hand things over to a partner, but still do better than me. I want to cherish all whose hoped for partner slipped out of reach; those who have navigated separation; those who, when I need solitude, may be craving company.

So, in all humility, on your behalf, thank you, Jenny. Thank you, in turn, Sheila and Ian.

Whatever our circumstances, prosperous or otherwise, parent or not, old or young, imagining a "better country," as Hebrews put it, involves unclogging the anxieties Jesus exposed and finding freedom in being generous to others. Shedding stultifying entitlement to imagine a better class room, a better office, better trade, better law, better healthcare and indeed a better church – one where Sandi Toksvig could feel cherished – is to bring the Kingdom a little nearer. I wonder, prompted by Jesus' witty insight, I wonder if our country, facing recession and inflation would be a better country if we pulled down the hatches and protected ourselves or if it is precisely the time to give more away.