

A Promised Holy Land?

A sermon on Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 & Romans 4:13-25 by Nathan Nettleton, 25 February 2018

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Message

God has promised the whole world to all God's children, but not exclusive rights to some bits of it to some people.

Sermon

For quite some time now, one of the more contentious global political issues has been the modern state of Israel and its claims to a God-given right of exclusive sovereignty over the territory often called the "holy land". Glennys reminded us of this a few weeks ago when she shared some of her reflections on her recent visit to the holy land, highlighting the walls and checkpoints and signs that bore graphic witness to the harsh limitations placed on the freedom of movement of the Palestinian people.

Historically, the motivations behind Israel's resolute unwillingness to compromise have been religious. Orthodox Jews claim that God promised the land of Canaan to the Israelite people through their ancestor Abraham, more than 3800 years ago, and that that promise still holds. The argument goes that since this land is a gift of God given exclusively to the people of Israel, any compromise on its ownership or occupation would be unfaithful to God.

But of course, even when the Israelite people first occupied the land in Biblical times, there were other people already there who regarded the land as their land, and again when the modern state of Israel was set up at the end of the second world war, there were again people who had lived on that land for generations and who quite reasonably regarded it as their home. That clash of claims continues to erupt in violence time after time with no apparent end in sight.

At first glance, it may seem that this situation has very little to do with us, but I want to suggest that it is a lot more relevant to our life and faith than most of us might realise. Firstly, a lot of the anger and resentment that drives Islamist attacks around the world is fuelled by this dispute over the holy land, so if we don't want to see our world spiralling further and further into violent chaos, we need to think through and sort out this conflict. Secondly, evangelical Christians have often been big supporters of Israel's claims, because we have often read the same scriptures in the same way and so reached the same conclusions about Israel's God-given rights, so we need to examine whether our understanding of the Bible might be a misguided contributor to an unjust conflict. And thirdly, the religious attitudes and assumptions that are at play in the holy land conflict will also be influencing life and faith in other places and other contexts, so we need to examine whether we are caught up in similar things.

Two of the Bible readings we heard tonight are directly relevant to this issue, because both talk about Abraham and Sarah and the promises made to them, and they may offer us some help in unravelling it.

In the first reading, we heard one of the stories of God making promises to Abraham and Sarah. This was not the story that is most relevant to the Jewish understanding of their right to the land, but it is still an important part of the picture. In this story we heard God

promising three things: an everlasting covenant, that is a binding committed relationship; a child to be born of Sarah despite the fact that both Abraham and Sarah were past child bearing age; and then descendants who would become a multitude of nations. These second two promises, the child and the subsequent descendants, were understood as aspects of the first, the covenant. The promise of land, found in other stories, was similarly understood as part of the covenant. So God was understood as having signed on to a binding everlasting agreement with Abraham and Sarah that included a child, a homeland, and countless generations of descendants living securely in that particular land.

In the second reading, from Paul's letter to the Romans, we heard the Apostle Paul quoting the first reading as he builds his case. The case that he is building certainly challenges the idea that the people of Israel have exclusive rights to own and control the holy land, but he doesn't go about it the way you might expect or the way many people would attempt to go about it today. Instead of arguing that the people of Israel are claiming too much, he argues that they are claiming too little. Instead of arguing that they have too big a vision of their own importance, he argues that their vision is too small.

Faced with the excesses of modern Israeli nationalism and militarism, that might sound more like a cause for fear than a cause for hope, but let's hear him out.

The context of Paul's argument is not the ownership of the holy land, but the relationship between Jews and gentiles and their status in relation to God. The standard line of Jewish thinking went, "God made these promises to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, and we are their legitimate descendants, so the promises are exclusively about us."

But the Apostle Paul argues that this is a short-sighted reading of the promise to Abraham and Sarah. He says, "God did not say to Abraham and Sarah, 'I am making you the ancestors of a great nation.' Instead God said to them, 'I am making you the ancestors of a multitude of nations.'" Therefore this is not exclusively about Israel.

Furthermore, argues Paul, this promise is not based on the law with all its careful provisions for separating out insiders and outsiders and passing on land to one's descendants. The promise is grounded in Abraham and Sarah's faith, their willingness to put their trust in their covenant relationship with God and in God's ability to make good on that. And, says Paul, if it is grounded not in the laws of genetics and inheritance, but in faith, then the legitimate heirs of Abraham and Sarah are all those who share the faith of Abraham and Sarah, all those who share their committed trusting relationship with God. From the multitude of nations.

And so, says Paul, God did not just promise a strip of land in the Middle East to the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. God promised that they would inherit the whole world.

Paul is arguing that this is the good news that was hidden or unrecognised from the foundation of the world, and that is now being unveiled and made known in Jesus the Christ. God's covenant promises are not for one exclusive group over and against the interests of the rest of the human race. God's covenant promises are for all people, for the multitude of nations, for the whole world.

So let me try to connect that back to the three ways that I said this might be very relevant to our life and faith today.

Firstly, in relation to global politics, it means that the heirs of God's promises to Abraham and Sarah are the Palestinian people just as much as the Israeli people and indeed, the Australian people and Iraqi people and Afghani people and the Burmese Rohingya people. No one is excluded from God's promises, for God's promises encompass the multitude of nations that is the whole world, and in fact, if we follow Paul's arguments for a few more chapters, the whole created order. The vision is global and cosmic. Therefore any political or religious argument that asserts that God favours one group of people over another is an argument that is not faithful to the God of Abraham and Sarah, to the God made known to us more fully in Jesus.

Secondly, in relation to how we read and understand the Bible, Paul's argument shows us that we always need to read the Bible with our eyes open to the overall trajectory of the Biblical revelation. When we take a bible verse or promise or story in isolation, we can often make the mistake of misunderstanding its place in the bigger unfolding story and thus hear its message in too small and exclusive a fashion.

Taken as a whole, the Biblical narrative reveals a constantly expanding vision. It shows that although we are always prone to thinking too small, we are progressively being shown the universal scope of God's covenant love and care. And any time we forget that, we can always find a verse or a story that will reinforce old prejudices and redraw old lines of exclusion and condemnation. We can find biblical verses that, on their own, can be used to justify slavery, and the oppression of women, and the silencing of children, and the exclusion of LGBT+ people, and the slaughter of Palestinians. But those readings only look persuasive if we lift the passages out of the broad sweep of God's self-revelation. The broad sweep should actually prepare us to be repeatedly shocked and surprised that God's love and care reaches beyond any limits we can imagine. Any reading that seems to grant us exclusive rights and to deny or reduce the rights of others is almost certainly unfaithful to the overall trajectory of the Bible.

That's almost got our third point covered too. How and where do we get caught up in the same sort of exclusive religious and nationalistic attitudes? In all sorts of ways. For us in Australia, there are two very obvious areas of similarity. Firstly, modern Australia, like both modern and ancient Israel, was founded by the invasion of a land that was already occupied by other nations, but whose rights to continued sovereignty over their own land were deemed to be extinguished by the colonising invaders who claimed to have been ordained by God to take possession and charge of this land. The legal and religious basis of those claims were false, and the massive injustice needs to be properly addressed.

Secondly, despite being a relatively recent immigrant people, the mainstream Australian community now regards themselves as having exclusive God-given rights to the benefits of this land and therefore believe they have the right to keep out anybody they don't want to share it with. Refugee families like Mary, Joseph and Jesus, or Middle-eastern wayfarers like Abraham and Sarah are stopped and turned back from our borders, because we regard ourselves as having some God-given exclusive right to the fruits of this land. We are wrong.

Even in the purely spiritual realms, we are still prone to wanting to use the Bible to separate ourselves off from others as God's specially chosen and favoured ones. I witnessed this in an online forum this past week. Someone suggested that it was ridiculous to imagine that God

might respond to the Dalai Lama's arrival at the pearly gates by saying "I loved all the work you did for peace, international understanding, and spiritual renewal. It's a pity you weren't a Christian. You'll have to go off to hell." But others immediately came back in the comments saying that however ridiculous it might sound, if the Dalai Lama didn't openly accept Jesus as his personal Lord and saviour, he would indeed end up in hell.

Can you see how this is really the same thing again? I don't pretend to know much about the Dalai Lama, but I do know that any group that thinks it can claim exclusive occupancy of the territory of heaven is repeating this same misunderstanding of God's promises and God's love. All the shocks and surprises will be over who's in, not who's out. The breadth of God's welcome will astonish us all.

If you are desperately attached to the idea that your acceptance by God is dependent on being better or more acceptable than other people, then this is probably not good news. As we heard the Apostle Paul say, "The promise rests on pure grace and is guaranteed equally to all." And if, like Simon Peter in tonight's gospel reading (Mark 8:31-38), you are desperately attached to the idea of always being on the side that conquers others and triumphs over all, this is probably not great news either. God's promises are not about victories over others.

But if you've experienced yourself as an outsider, as one who was made by others to feel like you weren't good enough, like you'd never make it, then this is very good news. The promise doesn't rest on your achievements or your moral purity or your belonging to any particular in-group. It rests on pure grace and is guaranteed equally to all, including you. And if you've been distressed by a religion that always seemed too small and too judgemental and too exclusive in its claims, then again this is very good news, because God's love is not at all confined or limited by the smallness of our imagination of it.

God's covenant love and care embrace each and every person, and the multitude of nations, and the entire cosmos. The holy land is no longer just a strip of hotly disputed land on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. The holy land that flows with the milk and honey of God's passionate love and mercy is now revealed to include every last inch of the earth and it is given to be shared by you and me and every last person on earth.