

SERMON, ST JOHN'S LENT II

The Lord brought Abraham outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." These two verses of Genesis, which we heard today, are among the most powerful and significant words of Scripture, for here we see the birth of the great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which are commonly called the "Abrahamic Religions." Here we see the start of incredible spiritual and cultural richness, depth, beauty and progress for the human community and here we see the beginning of horrific conflict, violence, suffering and regression – all in the name of God. It all begins with a relationship: God calls Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees to enter the Promised Land and Abraham trusts God and leaves everything behind to embark on the journey, which one might call the archetypal journey of faith. The point here is that faith is an active and living relationship, not so much believing in something, but passionately engaging with the divine in what has often been called a friendship or even a love affair. Relationships are not always easy and one of the spiritual gifts of the Jewish people to all of us is their understanding of faith as a struggle, wrestling with God through the night like Abraham's grandson, Jacob, who wrestled with the angel at the ford of the river Jabbok through the night and prevailed. The result is that Judaism has held questioning divine truth as a prime pillar of faith. For Christians, as taught by St. Paul, Abraham is the prototype of the person of faith. In Romans 4, Paul essentially preaches a sermon on Genesis 15, celebrating Abraham as the ancestor of all the faithful. The Christian engages fearlessly with God in Christ, in a relationship that demands nothing less than our absolute Love in response to the Love he first showed us. This relationship of faith, Paul says, is rooted solely in God's free gift of grace. And, finally, Muslims draw on this tradition of faith as relationship by simply referring to Abraham as "El Khalil", the Friend of God. So, this shared devotion to Abraham as the ancestor of all the faithful should be a source of peace and unity for the spiritual descendants of Abraham, his progeny in the three monotheistic religions, who are numbered like the stars of heaven, right? Ha!!

When I was at University in England, I took the opportunity of spending the summer of 1974 working on a Kibbutz, a Jewish agricultural commune, in the far north of Israel at the border where Israel, Lebanon and Syria meet. This year after the Yom Kippur War gave me the chance to see up close how well the three Abrahamic faiths live together in harmony. Needless to say, it was not a pretty sight, despite the beauty of the land and the richness of the religious traditions I witnessed. And possibly the most poignant of the holy sites I saw that summer, one which acutely manifests the most ruthless divisions and hatred in the name of God, was, ironically, the Tomb of the Patriarchs, the traditional burial place of Abraham, in the Cave of Machpelah at Hebron, in Arabic the city is "El Khalil," named for "the Friend of God." According to the Bible, when Sarah died at the age of 127, Abraham purchased the cave from Ephron the Hittite for her tomb, the first burial in the Bible and the first real estate transaction as well! Later, Abraham himself was buried there, as were Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel. The important point of this is that Abraham had been promised this land by God, but did not yet possess it, so this cave became the first foothold of the Jewish people in Israel, thus beginning a

violent and conflicted history of possession and dispossession of this land by a variety of peoples and religions until our own time. And the Cave of Machpelah itself is a particularly powerful symbol of this violence. What I saw in the summer of 1974 was a teeming and colorful city of Palestinian Muslims, garrisoned with a vast number of machine gun-wielding Israeli soldiers, and the Holy Shrine of the Tombs of the Patriarchs at the center of what appeared to be seething hatred, hatred that spanned all the centuries of the history of all three monotheistic religions. And I'm not here today to blame one religion over another, or to raise up one as more virtuous than the other, because they have all got blood on their hands. The main structure that one sees today is a massive roofless rectangular enclosure built by none other than King Herod who himself famously had blood on his hands. With the Christian conversion of Palestine in the 4th century, a great church was built over the Cave and it became an important site of Christian pilgrimage. When the Muslims invaded in the 7th century, the whole thing was rebuilt as a mosque, but when the Crusaders came in 1100, it was once again redesigned as a French style Christian cathedral, which is essentially what one sees there today inside Herod's enclosure. The Muslim ruler Saladin conquered it in 1188 and turned it back into a mosque, adding minarets to each corner. He was relatively open-minded and allowed Christians and Jews to worship there, but his successors banned anyone but Muslims, until the Israeli conquest of the West Bank in 1967. Since then, a Jewish synagogue has been created underneath the Muslim prayer hall. Sadly, this did not mean that this "holy place" would become a symbol of peaceful co-existence for the spiritual descendants of Abraham. Twice in 1968 grenades and bombs killed and maimed both Jews and Arabs, in 1976 a mob attacked and desecrated the synagogue, in 1980 Jewish worshippers were attacked and killed, in 1981 Jewish settlers desecrated the Muslim shrine and in 1994 the "Cave of the Patriarchs Massacre left 29 people dead, with a further 35 dying in subsequent riots. All in the name of Abraham, the Friend of God!

And today we see blood drenching the streets of Kiev, holy city to both Ukrainians and Russians, and tragically, we can't avoid discussion of the role religion plays in yet another horrific conflict. The Russian state actually had its origin in what is now Ukraine, and Vladimir the Great, Prince of Rus, chose the Orthodox Christian faith for his people in 988 AD and was himself baptized either in Crimea or in Kiev. He then had the entire population of Kiev baptized in the waters of the River Dnieper and Kiev became a kind of Jerusalem for the Russian people and remained strongly associated with their identity long after their center of power moved north and east to Moscow. It is no small irony that Putin's Christian name is Vladimir and there can be no doubt that the bloody campaign that he is waging against the Ukrainian people has roots in a Russian religious tribal identity that goes deep into their origins as a nation. And yet, in the attempt to claim this shrine of his people for Russia, Putin has chosen to shower this place with bombs. As in the case of the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron, hatred for others with a different tribal identity has triumphed over any genuine longing for God and it's almost better to destroy the holy places than to let others share them. Religion, once again, has become a mask for hatred of those who dare to be different, especially absurd between Ukrainians and Russians, who are hardly different at all!

How do you and I respond to our friends and family members who criticise all this violence in the name of God? You've heard it countless times: "How can you follow a faith that perpetrated the Crusades, the Inquisition, the pogroms of Jews, that thwarted civil rights for African Americans, that resisted equal rights for women and gays? They have an excellent point

and it's not possible to deny all the atrocities committed in the name of religion all through history and down to our present time. The descendants of Abraham, countless as the stars in the heavens, all of them, have much blood on their hands. So, what do you and I do in the face of all this?

We model genuine friendship with God. It all hinges on how we understand the nature of God, for if God is little more than an extension of our ego, our cultural identity, our tribal emblem, then of course hatred and violence in God's name is both tolerated and condoned. But if God is Love, then what does it mean to be God's friend? Perfect Love casts out all fear and hatred and there can be no room, no space, for division and enmity in a genuine relationship with God. Our model for the nature of God is, of course, the Perfection of Humanity we have seen in the life of Jesus, who far from raising up a religion of tribal identity, stood for a faith of radical inclusion – as I have repeated several times before, there are no outsiders in the Kingdom of God as taught by Jesus. Indeed, in consideration of the history of the Church, which has been almost all about who is on the inside and who is on the outside, it is deeply ironic that Jesus' stand for unconditional love for the outsider led him to the Cross. In today's Gospel, Jesus laments for Jerusalem, one might say the archetypal symbol of "established religion," for killing the prophets and stoning those sent to it to teach the love of God. Religion as the world knows it cannot stand those who resist the attempt to turn friendship of God into tribal identity. And this is essentially why they couldn't abide Jesus, who simply taught that God is Love and showed it through acts of healing, expressions of mercy and demonstrations of radical inclusion of those cast out by the supposedly devout. As Paul puts it in today's Epistle, many live as "enemies of the Cross of Christ," which I understand to mean that many religious folk simply cannot live into the truth that the Cross stands for the elimination of the divisions and hatreds that divide us (Christian, Muslim, Jew, Palestinian, Israeli, Ukrainian, Russian, Democrat, Republican). God's Kingdom is an infinitely large tent and when our friendship with God is demonstrated in a radically inclusive love for all who differ from us, only then are we faithful, like Abraham, to God's call. This call is not to enter the Promised Land of Palestine or Ukraine, but a true holy place where the power of unconquered Love reigns supreme. We may not personally be able to change the violent course of religious history in Hebron or Kiev, but by living into the truth of what friendship with God really requires, through living lives of radically inclusive Love, we may actually change the small worlds in which we live.