

Talk for Sunday, April 19<sup>th</sup> 2020.

SERMON SERIES –READY TO RESPOND

God's call to Abraham & Gladys Aylward-Gen. 12: 1-5 & Matt. 1: 18-24

Today, we start our new series "Ready to Respond", when we shall look at 4 people in Scripture, whose lives were changed by God, & in each case, consider the parallel with a more recent person's life story. Today it's the turn of Abraham & Gladys Aylward to reflect on the results of God's call to them.

Those of a certain age may recall a Persil advert "Before & After"-2 separate photos of a little girl walking along with one wearing an off white dress & the other a brilliant white one to make the point that the former was how she looked BEFORE her mother discovered Persil-the latter AFTER.. In the same way, we shall look at the HUGE contrast between Abram's familiar settled life in Ur or Haran & his unfamiliar pastoral, semi nomadic life after obeying God's call to move to Canaan. Likewise, there's the COLOSSAL difference between Gladys' familiar life as a parlour maid in 1930, before she followed God's call to serve in the totally unfamiliar set up of war torn China.

The contrast for Abram (his name then) was as follows. Life in Ur was civilized, settled & prosperous from trade-society was literate & the city secure from outside threats, whereas in Canaan he was an alien, he knew no one, he always had to be on the move to find pasture for his flocks, though he could have a more settled time near a town for awhile. Then there was always the danger of famine, hence a trip to Egypt once, or quarrels with fellow nomads over wells or the danger from marauding bands. This must have been more than a major mid-life crisis or career break! In Gen 12: 1 God recognizes the disruption Abram faced-the familiar things he would give up, he would leave "his country, his people & his father's household" a desperate rupture for a Middle Eastern family.

The cause of his move was that God told him to go to "a land that I will show you"-destination vague. As it says in Heb. 11: 8 "he obeyed & went, even though he did not know where he was going." In Gen. 12: 2-3, however, God gives 7 promises to Abram, which include making a great nation from him, making him a great God fearing character & making him a blessing to all nations. As Paul wrote in Rom. 4: 20 Abraham "staggered not at the promises of God."(AV)

Abram set off, fortified by these promises. He took with him Sarai, his wife, Lot his nephew, all his possessions accumulated over the years & the people acquired in Haran. He made slow progress towards Canaan. Indeed, he only owned one parcel of land there near Hebron, though he moved round from Shechem, where in Gen. 12: 7 God told him "to your offspring I will give this land", to Bethel to Beersheba to Gerar & so on.

What befell him during his wanderings? In a nutshell, after God's covenant or agreement of circumcision & the new name of Abraham, which followed a previous one Abraham, slowly, became a man of great faith, as God fulfilled his promise of their having a son against all the odds. This faith was tested to the limit on Mt. Moriah. Abraham saved Lot from destruction in Sodom in an answer to his prayer. He learnt how to defuse the quarrel with Abimelech over wells Gen. 20. Thus, in many ways, he became more of a man after God's own heart-in contrast to all around him he believed in ONE God who was almighty, eternal, righteous, just & merciful. In the future, the story line of Israel & Christianity goes back to him.

Gladys Aylward's story has much in common with Abraham's, when her origin is shown.

The contrast between her early life in London & her later travails in China is huge. She was born in 1903 in fairly humble circumstances in London & by 1930 she, at least, had a job as a parlour maid. It was a hard life below stairs, humdrum, onerous & dull, but it was relatively secure, even if much depended on the relationship between the staff & "upstairs"! China, of course, was dangerous, unstable & backward-there was the constant fighting between the war lords, so that life was harsh & very uncertain. When she arrived, she did not know anyone, could not speak a word of Chinese & was totally on her own, for she had dropped out of the missionary training course run by the China Inland Mission in England. As she said "I did not have missionary training or status-I was answerable to God & no one else."

The cause of her move was like Abraham's. She said in 1959 "I went to China, because God asked me." That conviction never wavered-she told her parents "Never get me out or pay a ransom for me. God is sufficient." She knew she had been called to be "a fisher of men of men" there.

She set off with very little, unlike Abraham, but was fortified by the certainty that China was where God wanted her to be. She took a bed roll, a kettle, a saucepan, a suitcase of tinned food, little change, her faith in the Lord & desire to carry the message of Christ to the Chinese. She arrived knowing neither language, nor customs nor anyone to help. Undaunted she went first to Yangcheng in northern China & worked with an old-time China missionary, Mrs Jeannie Lawson, who died after a year.

What befell her after that? She & Mrs Lawson had started an inn for mule drivers The first Chinese Gladys learnt was "We have no bugs, we have no fleas. Good, good, good-come, come, come" The Chinese came to eat & rest & were told simple Bible stories. She learned the dialects & persevered as a missionary. She said "I work kind of alongside everyone. We're all after the one thing souls for Jesus Christ" As she worked alongside Baptists & Methodists, she did not care "if they're sprinkled or immersed." She worked amongst children, too-hence in 1938 she led almost 100 children between the ages of four & eight on a 27 day march of 100 miles to escape the advancing Japanese-by the end she virtually unconscious & delirious with typhus. God had prove sufficient in that crisis.

Despite the war & the Communist take over she continued to work in China till 1950, when she fled to Taiwan, where she established an orphanage. Later, she set up a mission in Hong Kong. By the time of her death in 1970 she had been made famous by the film "The Inn of the Sixth Happiness", but her real impact was on the Chinese, whom she led to Christ & are part of the 'confessional church' which has survived in China despite all the pressures from Mao till now.

What can we apply from these two believers & Joseph? He at God's command rose to the challenge of leaving the familiar-a divorce (public or private) after discovering that Mary was pregnant before their marriage-& accepting the unfamiliar that "what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" Matt. 1: 20, so "he took Mary home as his wife" Matt. 1: 24. It is reassuring that Abraham, despite his flaws, trusted God's promises grew in faith in God & was transformed. That is the challenge to me-to learn to grow in faith. Juliet & I heard Gladys Aylward speak in Derby in the late '60's, when materialism, 'flower power' & the rejection of Christianity were all the rage. My memory is hazy, but I recall a tiny figure, dressed in a Chinese outfit & speaking with great intensity. She was urging us to follow Jesus, trusting His promises, (as she had done), so we could go wherever He took us & not be like the crowd in Vanity Fair following some current fad of ungodliness-a message we need so much now.