



## Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

First Sunday after Trinity

readings: Genesis 12 1-9; Romans 4 13-25; Matthew 9 9-13, 18-26.

7 June 2026

In a previous incarnation, I was for 11 years the timetabler for a comprehensive school of 2000 pupils, allocating teachers to classes across a split-site campus: an interesting annual intellectual challenge! Experienced timetablers will tell you that they don't like too many *choices*: it is far better to have simple binary decisions which lead to unique solutions than waste time worrying about which choice to make, which way to turn, and then get it wrong.

As a preacher this morning, I am not in that envious position: rather I am spoilt for choice. The compilers of the lectionary, clearly freed from the constraints of Easter, Pentecost and Trinity, have now been able to offer three readings with a veritable cornucopia of themes for a sermon today : an OT lesson from Genesis about Abraham, a NT lesson from Romans linking Abraham to matters of law and faith, justification and righteousness, and a gospel reading which not only covers the calling of Matthew to be a disciple, an account of Christ's dining relations with 'tax collectors and sinners' and the Pharisaic hostility to this, but also manages to interleave the stories of the restoration of the leader of the synagogue's dying daughter and the healing of a woman with persistent haemorrhaging. Quite a smorgasbord! And if that's not enough, today is also designated as Environment Sunday, and the related Psalm 33 that we have heard sung, has been described as "a hymn of praise with a horizon as wide as all creation". No wonder one commentary I consulted rather unhelpfully informs me that the wealth of possibilities here will force the preacher to make some choices. Precisely the *dilemma of choice* that I'm trying to avoid having to make.

Fortunately I can detect this as a common theme across the piste. Whilst coming from various perspectives, all our scripture readings this morning confront us with the dilemma of the human response to the gracious initiative of a promise-making and promise-keeping Creator God: the *dilemma of choice*, to choose to stay in the security of the familiar, or instead to choose to take the life-changing decision to accept God's call in a covenant of trust and obedience. Each response has its own particular dynamic, yet they are powerfully linked in the courageous ways in which the promises and demands of God are accepted, risked and confirmed amidst the constraints, pressures and fears of human experience.

Let's look at each of these examples in turn. Environment Sunday stimulates us yet again to confront the *dilemma of choice* in respect of our attitude towards climate change: do we choose to stay in the security of the familiar, to pretend it is not happening or if it is, persuading ourselves future generations will be able to sort it out, or do we choose to break free of the prevailing stereotypes and radically change our behaviours as stewards of God's creation, in order to protect the planet entrusted to us? It is a choice neatly encapsulated in the contrasting attitudes of Donald Trump or Greta Thunberg: a *dilemma of choice*.

Genesis describes the *dilemma of choice* facing Abraham: to choose to stay put in the familiar comfort of home, or to choose to respond to God's call to leave the security of his native country, his kindred and his father's house for a land unknown and unseen. A journey initiated by a promise; a journey provided with only minimal travel directions; a journey destined to be fraught with risk and beset by opposition. So let us not underestimate the courage required to choose to embark on this. As one commentator has put it "to leave home and break ancestral bonds was to expect of ancient man almost the impossible"<sup>1</sup>.

Yet this is what Abraham did: he heard the call of God, he believed in the promises of God, he entered into a covenant with God, he forsook the security of his present existence for the dream of a promised land.

Commenting on this story, Paul in his Letter to the Romans leaves us in no doubt about its universal significance. Abraham is the father of us all. By choosing to leave his native land to go to a country he has yet to be shown, he points us to God, the God who calls us out from our present selves in order to bring us to a fuller realisation of our potential, the God who is able to bring the dead in both a physical and spiritual sense back to life, and to bring into being even that which does not presently exist.

Yet Abraham was not justified by his deeds but by his faith: his trust in God. And thus his acceptance of his call, his willing entering into a covenant with God makes him worthy of a new name: no longer to be called Abram, (simply meaning in Hebrew “exalted father”) but Abraham, meaning “the father of all nations”. And as the psalmist promises in Psalm 33, all those who also accept this covenant of trust and obedience will be blessed. “Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage”.

Abraham’s faith is more than the solitary response of a single individual, for he stands as a paradigm for all. His descendants number all those who share his faith, all who believe in the divine promise, a promise that is fulfilled through the righteousness of faith and not simply by obedience to the law; all those who choose to accept its cost. So thankfully like Abraham, our faith rests not in our own achievements nor is it fatally compromised by our own shortcomings, but stands on the foundational promise of God’s gift of grace.

Matthew, in our gospel reading, certainly needed that gift of grace. Sitting at his tax booth, unloved, for no one likes tax collectors, especially if they are quisling Jews collaborating with the hated Roman authorities, especially if they have a reputation for acting in their own self-interest, of enriching themselves on the side, he is faced with the unexpected *dilemma of choice*. “Follow me” says Jesus. So does he choose to stay put in his familiar world, or to strike off into the unknown with Jesus? As Dietrich Bonhoeffer would warn him: “the disciple is dragged out of his relative security into a life of absolute insecurity”<sup>2</sup>. Yet Matthew’s choice is instantly made! The immediateness of his response is striking: his acceptance of a drastic change in direction and a radical transformation of commitment is a powerful example of willing acceptance of the risk of breaking free from the familiar in order to obey the call. And what a contrast with the ostensibly religious who think evil in their hearts and grumble amongst themselves about this usurping upstart Jesus. The prototype sinner of a tax collector spontaneously obeys Jesus’s call while the conventionally religious remain offended by this display of transcendent grace.

And even more offended when they learn of Jesus not only going on to dine with Matthew but in the company of many other tax collectors too, who accustomed to their place on the margins of civilised religious society are welcomed in from the cold to the warmth of God’s grace: an action which blurs the boundaries and makes plain a grace so amazing that religious folk, snug in the security of their conventional identities, are left unsettled and unnerved. And even more unsettled by the circulating stories of the restoration to life of Jairus’s daughter and the healing of the woman with the haemorrhage, the physical and spiritual healings of protagonists choosing to risk all in order to escape from the confines of their distress into a new life of hope made possible through Christ.

Abraham choosing, journeying, obeying in faith.

Matthew choosing, moving, following in faith.

And we too, like them, if we but choose to break free from our comfort zone and respond in faith, may also be confident that when God calls, he also equips.

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1 Gerhard von Rad “*Genesis: A Commentary*” (1961, Westminster Press) p157

2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer “*The Cost of Discipleship*” (1995, Touchstone) p58