

Sermon on 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time (9 July 2017) Jim Lam

The only daughter of a rich man fell in love with a poor theology student training to be a clergy. She wanted to marry him, so she brought him to her father's house to discuss the matter. After supper, the father took the hopeful young man into his study and asked how he planned to provide for his future wife and family. The young man fervently replied, "God will provide."

After the young man had left, the rich man's wife asked him what he thought of their daughter's choice. The rich man replied, "He is penniless.... but then, he thinks I am God!"

What a self-centred man! Perhaps it is his financial success that blinded him in his perception of himself. But are financial affluence and high social status obstacles to seeing God as God? Not necessarily. Abraham, one of the greatest biblical faith heroes, one who was blessed with wealth and addressed as a "mighty prince" by his Hittite neighbours (Genesis 23:6), serves as a good example.

In the story of Isaac and Rebekah we heard just now, Isaac's father, Abraham, gave his servant an important and difficult task: he asked him to find Isaac a wife from Abraham's own kindred, from his own home country. As the story goes on, we find that despite the potentially perilous journey and unlikeliness of his success, the servant did find a suitable lady for his young master and brought her safely back to Canaan, which was some 700 to 900 kilometres from her homeland. Everything seemed so easy and smooth, so effortless, so matter of course. Even so, we can still see the great faith behind Abraham's decision.

Why did Abraham insist to find Isaac a wife from his own kindred from his faraway homeland, instead of looking for a nicely brought up young lady nearby? There are two possible reasons. Firstly, if Isaac took a Canaanite wife, it would be more likely for him to be subjected to the influence of the local religions. Secondly, local marital connections might mean that

it would be more likely for Isaac to be attracted by the material prosperity of Mesopotamia. These could be detrimental to receiving the Promise to become God's chosen people. Although Abraham might not fully understand or comprehend God's promise and plans, he insisted to do everything in his power to be worthy of this Promise. He tried to fit in with God's plans for him. And so, in ready submission and with firm conviction that God would provide, he sent a trusted servant back to his homeland to find his son a wife.

It is highly likely that this servant was Eliezer of Damascus whom Abraham had in mind to make heir of his house (see Genesis 15:2-3). This was before the birth of his son. Eliezer had been working for Abraham for a long time, and knew his master's mind. He would not sacrifice his master's standard to save himself trouble. He did not only value looks, but also paid attention to inner beauty. He wanted to find a lady who would not only passively respond to other's needs, but would take it upon herself to care for others. And so, when Rebekah gave him water and, without his asking, watered his camels, Eliezer firmly believed that she was the one chosen by the Lord to be his young master's wife. From this, we can see that he was determined to find the best wife for his young master – only the best. And he trusted in the Lord's provision.

Rebekah's faith was also remarkable. It took great courage and faith to agree to a marriage proposal made by a total stranger on behalf of another stranger, and to marry into a family settled at a place that was not only far away from home but was even less sophisticated than her homeland. Such faith is comparable to those of Abraham, her father-in-law-to-be. No wonder her family sent her away with a blessing that she would become the mother of large nations (see Genesis 24:60), a blessing that was closely related to God's promise to Abraham.

As for Isaac, who had not uttered a single word throughout the story, he also appeared to be someone who persisted in faith and waited patiently in silence. He was of the age of marriage, but had not shown any

restlessness or anxiety for himself. Instead, he remained mournful after his mother's death, and was only comforted after meeting Rebekah.

Below the tranquil surface of this story, we can see that all four major characters were faced with their own difficult tests of faith. However, all of them were willing to submit completely in faith. They believed that God had the best plans for them. And they persisted in faithful obedience to what God had in mind for them. For them, God did provide. And what God provided was, and will always be, the best. All we have to do is to persist in faith.

Yet, to persist in obedience and submission is easier said than done. As our reading in Romans this morning shows, there is a law of disobedience in us. This law appears to pull us in the opposite direction even though we try hard to set our minds on God. The Apostle Paul wrote, "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it" (Romans 7:18). How unfortunate! How helpless! But it is worse than that. The Apostle went on, "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24) It sounded as if he was being tortured both physically and spiritually!

What then can we do to fight against the pull of this law of disobedience?

As New Zealanders, I believe all of us must have come across the Beef + Lamb New Zealand Inc. advertisements featuring their iron maiden ambassadors. Some of them, like, the Evers-Swindell twins Caroline and Georgina, have become household names throughout the country. Their stories tell us that behind their outstanding athletic achievements are a healthy life-style of disciplined training and good nutrition. Similarly, if we recognise the power of this law of disobedience over us, we would realise our need for spiritual disciplines to provide us with the necessary training and nutrition. The chief of these spiritual disciplines include praying, bible reading, and receiving the Lord's Supper.

I am not saying that spiritual disciplines by themselves can make us right with God in any way. We are saved by and through God's grace alone. Spiritual disciplines are practices we do regularly that can help us, with

the power and grace of the Holy Spirit, change our sinful habits – that is, the force that pulls us in the opposite direction – into good habits that make us more like Christ and connect us closer to God. Through this, we may hope to be a slave to the law of God with our minds (Romans 7:25), as the Apostle did.

However, there is another stumbling block on the way of submission. It is rejection. In our gospel reading today, Jesus compared his generation to children at play: Whatever music he played on the flute, people would not join in and play. Jesus was speaking from experience. Whether it was John the Baptist's ascetic practices or Jesus' reaching out to the socially disadvantaged, they were simply rejected or ignored by their generation at large. The wise and the learned had rejected Jesus. Those who welcomed and accepted him were the humble and the uncomplicated. We must be mindful that Jesus was not condemning knowledge and learning, but rather, those who pride themselves on and trust only in their knowledge and learning. The gospel is heart knowledge rather than head knowledge. No wonder Jesus went on to state that God's truth was hidden from the wise and intelligent but was revealed to infants. Or, let us put it this way: only those as pure hearted as infants could answer the Lord's call to walk this way of submission.

As Christians, have we ever reflected on what the Lord's calling for us is? What is our mission in life? Would we sacrifice our Master's standard to avoid unfavourable circumstances or to save ourselves trouble? Can we stay committed to our faith and our God in the face of fierce struggles and stumbling blocks? Whatever hardships and trials we may face in life, we can be rest assured of Jesus' promise:

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,
and I will give you rest.
For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Amen.