

Laughing at the Lord

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 3rd of September 2000. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Laughing at the Lord and is from Genesis chapter 18 verses 1 to 15.

Well let me tell you some exciting news. I like getting the mail and occasionally there's something interesting in the mail other than a bill or an advertisement wanting me to sponsor or give money to some other charity.

So it's very exciting on Friday when I went to the mail and there was a personally addressed envelope, personal and confidential on the top, addressed to me for Holy Trinity Church. And I opened it and inside was an anonymous check for \$855,000 which is what we need for our building appeal.

And I stood at the gate and I stared and it's too good to be true. It didn't happen. You see some things are too good to be true, aren't they?

[1 : 18] I mean we might dream about collecting the mail and finding a check for \$855,000 so that we can instantly do the building program that we need to do. But some things are just too good to be true.

I guess I'm still dreaming for the day when I find that check in the mail. Some things are too good to be true. Richmond making the finals when I live in Melbourne. Families being reconciled after years of hostility or animosity.

Peace in Northern Ireland that will last. Some things seem too good to be true. Politicians who actually keep their promises from whatever side of politics.

Some things seem too good to be true. A couple who've tried for many years to have children. Suddenly becoming pregnant.

Some things seem too good to be true. Abram and Sarah were just such a couple. God had promised them descendants.

[2 : 27] The odd thing about the promise was that they weren't a couple in their 20s who had their life ahead of them, were fit and well and healthy and could expect to have dozens of children. They were in their mid-70s.

And she was barren. And they had no children. It was an unlikely promise. And God made it in chapter 12 of the book of Genesis.

And three chapters later he reiterated it because Abraham was doubting that this promise was actually going to be fulfilled. Fair enough really when you're such an age and your wife is barren.

Abram then went and tried to produce a child or actually did produce a child through his wife's maid, Hagar. But God rebuked him for that and said, That's not what I had in mind. And then again he reiterated the promise in chapter 17, quite specifically to Abram, that he would have a son through his wife Sarah.

They were 75 when the first promise was made and now it's 24 years later. We could hardly criticize them for doubting that God was going to keep his word.

[3 : 37] They're about 99 years old. And even in those days, it was unlikely that they, barren and old, could really ever have children.

Sarah was past the age of childbearing, past the stage of menopause. Surely it's too late. Surely such a promise is too good to come true.

On this particular day, it is the heat of the day. It's after lunch. It is probably siesta time. And Abraham may well have been asleep in the entrance to his tent, presumably in the shade of the tent, and where he would get a little bit of breeze perhaps.

The coolest place for a post-lunch nap. And suddenly, he sees three men in front of him. It may be that they've just miraculously appeared, but I think it could also probably be that he's actually dozed off and he's stirred to find just near him three men.

Not right in front of him, but he hasn't noticed them approaching him. And all of a sudden, he perhaps stirs to see them coming quite close. We're told in verse 1 of this chapter, you may like to have it open in front of you, page 12 in the Bibles that are in front of you, the Lord appeared to Abraham.

[5 : 03] But in verse 2, when Abraham looked up, he saw three men standing near him. That is, we're not told that he actually saw the Lord, the Lord and two angels.

We're told that he saw three men. And the way it's told, it suggests that Abraham was not quite sure who it was that he saw. Three men. They seem to be important from the way Abraham treats them in this story.

It may be that he's just beginning to get glimpses of who they might be, but I'm not sure that initially, he actually thought it's the Lord. That is, the person who's written this tells us it's the Lord so that we know, but I'm not sure that Abraham knew straight away.

We're not sure who the other two were. Probably they were angels, angelic or divine messengers. with God. Abraham's response to these three people that he suddenly sees in the heat of the day and the afternoon is quite generous in its hospitality.

We'll see next week a situation where people were very inhospitable. The two are in direct contrast. Chapter 19, the people of a place called Sodom lacked any gift of hospitality.

[6 : 21] Abraham, on the other hand, is generous and lavish as we'll see with his hospitality. When the men approach him in verse 2, or when he rather approaches them in verse 2, he bows down to the ground.

To bow down before God is to lie prostrate in an act of worship before God. But you can bow down to another person which is an act of respect, not necessarily worship.

Abraham's bowing down suggests, well, maybe this is a God character, but maybe he's just showing rather excessive respect to some unknown strangers who seem to him to be important.

Abraham's words to these men, he says to them in verse 3, my Lord, which we shouldn't take to mean my God, as in God who is the Lord, but rather, sir, a sort of mark of some deference and some respect here.

My Lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. That's a formal statement. It's a little bit long-winded.

[7 : 33] It's rather eloquent. What Abraham is doing here is showing utmost respect, some humility, and he's in effect laying on the charm.

He wants these people to stay for a meal at least. So he's doing everything he can by way of politeness and formality and respect to encourage that to happen.

He actually addresses just one of the three. So maybe by appearance the Lord is set apart from the other two. Maybe he's walking ahead. We just don't know.

But certainly in verse 3 he addresses just one person who probably is the Lord of verse 1. Maybe Abraham is suspecting something about this character even though maybe he's not quite sure what it is.

Well he offers them what hot and weary travellers in the ancient and dry, dusty world would need. He offers them water in verse 4.

[8 : 36] Let a little water be brought and wash your feet. The first thing that you would offer by way of hospitality to somebody who's been travelling. Secondly, he offers them a place or opportunity to rest under the tree.

We're told that Abram is camped by or staying by the Oaks of Mamre. It's down near Hebron. It was probably significant oak trees and a sort of mark on the landscape that people would know.

So he offers them the opportunity to stay under his trees in the shade to have some rest out of the heat of the day. The third thing he offers them in verse 5 is a little bit of bread to eat.

His actual words suggest a little morsel of bread or perhaps more generally food. And in one sense it sounds a bit mean. Look, I'll just get you a little bit of bread as though he's being stingy.

But we see from what happens later on that Abram is far from stingy. He's actually lavish and extravagant with what he gives these visitors. What I think he's doing when he says I'll just get you a little bread is understating his generosity.

[9 : 55] If you drop in to visit some people and they say to you well stay for a meal. I'll just go and get a leg of lamb and I'll put it in the oven and I'll chop up some potatoes and some onions and I'll make up some cauliflower cheese and I'll just go and beat up a pavlova and cook a pavlova and I'll just run down to the shops and get some ice cream and so on.

Your reaction probably unless you're starving or really selfish is don't bother a cup of tea will be fine. Abram is offering them just a little bit of bread so that they'll stay so that they won't say look we don't want you to go to trouble we'll just pass on to the next person.

That is he's understating his hospitality. He's understating his generosity. And to be honest generous people are like that. Generous people don't make a fuss and song and dance about their generosity.

Generosity is often accompanied by humility and that's what Abram is doing here. He is generous he is hospitable and he wants to make no fuss about it. He's not drawing attention to it.

He's offering them a little bit of bread but what they actually get as we'll see in a minute is far more than that. He wants these guests to stay and he finishes his words to them in verse 5 by saying that after that you may pass on since you have come to your servant.

[11 : 16] Again it's a mark of respect. It's a strange expression and in some ways it's probably idiomatic for something like you are honouring me by staying here.

You're almost to the point of saying you've made my day. Abram is honoured by these guests coming to him. Well inside the tent is his wife Sarah and he says to her in verse 6 make ready quickly three measures of choice flour knead it and make cakes.

A fair enough request given the situation but what he says by three measures three seers they were called is about the equivalent of six gallons of cake mixture.

Now I'm not much of a cook but I think that six gallons is a lot of cake mixture and it would make probably more cake than three visitors Abraham and Sarah could eat in the middle of a hot afternoon.

But nonetheless Abram is showing his extravagance here. He then himself goes out to the herd he takes a calf a tender and good calf gave it to his servant and the servant then prepared it.

[12 : 35] He doesn't just take a goat or a lamb he doesn't take a bit of leftover meat either. He takes a good and tender that is probably young in its prime calf.

That is the best meat that he could get. It is a costly exercise. Even though he may have had vast herds to kill a herd or a calf or a stranger was being rather extravagant in your generosity and in your hospitality.

And then we're told in verse 8 that when all of this was prepared presumably he took curds that is like yogurt still served with most Middle Eastern meals today along with bread and meat and so on and he took some milk and the calf presumably the cakes though they're not mentioned maybe they were burnt and set it before the visitors and like any good Middle Eastern host he didn't sit down to eat with them he stood to the side while they ate and he probably himself served at their table.

Now some things to notice about what's been going on here. Firstly it is all done with haste. There is an emphasis on speed and that's an emphasis that's seen in three particular ways.

One is words to do with haste and speed. So notice for example in verse 2 when he saw three men standing near him he ran from the tent. It's not something a grown man would do very often in the ancient Middle East.

[14 : 10] In the story of the prodigal son which Phil alluded to at the beginning the man when he sees his son coming runs to meet him. Now normally men would walk.

It would be in an exceptional situation for men to run certainly in a public sort of place. So when Abraham runs it's probably a bit unusual.

But that sense of speed is carried on with other words to do with running or hasting. So in verse 6 Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah. He didn't just go in he hastened into it.

And then he said to her make ready quickly three measures of flour. That is there's an urgency about all this. And then in verse 7 Abraham ran to the herd. It could well have been at a bit of a distance from the tent keeping the animals away from the tent maybe under some other trees far off under the care of some shepherd or servant presumably.

And he gave the calf that he chose to the servant who hastened to prepare it. Now we have to say that the repetition of those words twice to run twice to hasten once quickly conveys a sense of urgency.

[15 : 21] The second way that sense is conveyed is the words that Abraham speaks to Sarah. He doesn't sort of give her a long winded sort of generous instruction about would it be possible perhaps if you could make some cakes this afternoon.

His words to her are abrupt and brief briefer even than the English translation. Quick three measures of flour make cakes is sort of the thrust of it. Now he's not being rude to Sarah it's just the sense of speed and urgency that's going on here.

The sense of what's going on here is building up a climax of anticipation. The third way it's done is just generally in the Hebrew sentences is that the syntax is of short sharp sentences and clauses.

They're not long flowing sentences here. Everything is quick quick quick so in every way these verses are urgent and for the reader I think we're meant to see something important is about to happen.

It is building up to a quick climax. It is anticipating something significant with these three important although to one extent unknown guests at least in Abram's eyes.

[16 : 44] He nonetheless sees that they're important guests his hospitality is lavish and extravagant and generous as I've said and we've seen. He offers them cakes that are made of choice flour.

The only other time that expression is used in the early part of the Bible is to do with a sacrifice of cakes or cereal offering to God in the book of Leviticus and when he takes a calf that is good and tender it is just like the sort of calf that you should offer as a sacrifice to God in the sacrifices.

What I think is going on here is hinting that what is offered to these three people is of the quality that is demanded to be offered in a sacrifice to God whether of an animal or some cake offering or cereal offering.

So we get a sense that these visitors are told at first it is the Lord but even Abraham senses this is something important here and he doesn't want to miss the opportunity for what it is about.

I suspect that to this point he is not quite clear who these visitors are he knows they are important but I think he is a model here of what we read in the latter part of the Bible do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

[18 : 01] I think Abraham is an example of those words from Hebrews 13. He is showing hospitality even to a stranger and he is thereby entertaining angels unawares.

That's a principle that the writer to the Hebrews applies to Christians generally. We are to be hospitable and generous people even to strangers and people we don't know.

It struck me as almost ironic that having preached this sermon at 5pm here today and then going out of the church before coming here tonight somebody came to me wanting money for petrol and I suddenly thought I cannot deny this person having just preached and about to preach a sermon that at least in part commands us to be generous and hospitable.

The story slows down now. We go from short sharp sentences and an emphasis on speed into the conversation presumably at the end of the meal.

No longer is Abraham active and rushing around the place. It is the three guests in particular the Lord who now becomes the subject of most of the verbs. He's the one in control.

[19 : 16] The meal is over. The conversation begins and they say to him, maybe all three, where is your wife Sarah? Sarah. Now why ask?

Surely they knew she was in the tent. After all, they would have heard her clattering around baking cakes. I mean, you can't do six gallons worth of cake mixture, I think, all that quietly, in a tent where you can hear everything that happens through the walls of a tent.

But maybe more importantly, how do they know her name? Now we could surmise that earlier in the conversation Abraham's been chatting away about his wife Sarah and so on. But we're not told that.

The first time her name is mentioned by way of speaking with the people is them saying, where is your wife Sarah?

How do they know? Is this, as I suspect, an indication of some special knowledge, some divine knowledge? The theological term for this is omniscience.

[20 : 19] Don't be put off by a big word. It simply means that God knows everything. And here is an example of that divine or God's omniscience, knowing everything. He knows Abraham's wife Sarah.

He actually knows that she's in the tent. That's not the point of the question, where is she? So that he finds out. Like many of the questions God asks of people in scripture, he knows the answer.

But he's actually making some other point. And the point is that the purpose of the visit of these three men, is not for Abraham's benefit. It's actually for Sarah's benefit.

What is declared here does take Abraham beyond what he knows. But fundamentally the purpose of their visit is for the benefit of Sarah. Well, they go on to, Abraham says she's in the tent, and then one of them said, and this presumably is the Lord, I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.

He said that presumably knowing that Sarah in the tent, and they're just at the entrance to the tent, is within earshot. He is in effect speaking to Abraham's wife Sarah.

[21 : 33] And in the custom of the Middle East and so on, it would probably be rather unusual etiquette, to actually walk into the tent to speak to a man's wife.

So he is speaking to her directly as only he could without breaking protocol, I think, by speaking so that he knows that she inside the tent can hear his words.

In effect, he is saying to Sarah, I will come to you and you will have a son in due season. The words are emphatic.

It's not an idle promise. They're not casual words. I will surely return to you in due season. It is about as strong an emphasis on something that will definitely happen as you can have in ancient Hebrew.

And to say in due season probably means next year or within a year. Now this promise of a child has been made 24 years before to Abraham in Genesis 12.

[22 : 36] It was repeated to Abraham in Genesis 15. It was then repeated again to Abraham in Genesis 17. But now for the first time the promise of a child is made to Sarah directly.

Oh it's clear that Sarah is going to be the mother. That was clear certainly in chapter 17 if not before. But now Sarah hears the promise made. But one more thing.

It is now given a definite time frame of fulfillment. It is not just an open ended promise that at some stage in the future you will become the parents of a great nation. Now it is that within one year you will have a child.

You see it's one thing to trust God's promise that he says one day I will do this. But now for Abraham and Sarah they are being told to trust a promise that says within a year you will have a child.

suddenly the fulfillment of promise becomes imminent and that actually forces a greater level of trust. Not less trust but a greater level of trust.

[23 : 47] Abraham's age and indeed Sarah's age in particular is stressed in verse 11. We know that if we've been reading these chapters. The writer doesn't need to tell us that but he tells us again to emphasize the point that they are very old and beyond the age of bearing children.

So it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women in verse 11 basically means in a polite way that she can't have kids. And do you blame her for laughing?

Do you blame a 99 year old woman for laughing at a strange guest who's outside with your husband saying within a year your wife will have a son? I think it's hard to blame her for laughing to herself.

It's too good to be true. It won't happen. Surely, surely it won't happen. And she laughs just as Abraham laughed in chapter 17 when the promise was reiterated to him.

You see sometimes it's very hard to believe God's promises. Sometimes it's very hard to believe that there comes a time, a heaven of God's place that is perfect in every way.

[24 : 59] God's promise. It seems such a hard promise to believe. It seems so hard to believe that Jesus will return. He hasn't come in 2,000 years.

There doesn't seem to be much reason to think that he's about to come again. It's hard to believe sometimes the promises of God. And like Sarah and like Abraham in the previous chapter, well may we laugh to ourselves when we read and ponder the promises of God in scripture.

But the Lord hears her laugh and he issues a mild rebuke in verse 13. The Lord said to Abraham, but really of course he's speaking to Sarah who can hear and he knows she can hear.

Why did Sarah laugh and say, shall I indeed bear a child now that I'm old? Again, he's not asking because he wants to know the answer. He knows the answer. He knows that she doesn't believe the promise.

And he knows that she's got humanly speaking every good reason not to believe the promise. She's past childbearing age and so on. In some sense it's really a rhetorical question.

[26 : 09] And then he goes on with another one in verse 14 that is the crunch of this passage. Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

With the sense of is anything impossible for God? And that is the key not only of this passage. It is certainly the key of the chapters leading up to it. And in many respects it's the sort of question that we have to ask of the God of the Bible as a whole.

Is anything too wonderful? Is anything impossible for this God? And the question here as everywhere in scripture demands the answer, no.

nothing's too wonderful for God. Nothing is impossible for God. God can do what he likes. The theological word for this is that he is omnipotent.

We've seen that he is omniscient, knowing everything. He is also omnipotent, meaning that he can do anything and everything. He is all powerful. And he chose two old, childless, barren people to be the father of a great nation.

[27 : 20] It's not the way the world would do it. If the world was trying to start a new nation to fulfill the purposes of the world or something, it would pick two people in their 20s, in our young adults group for example, and say, you are going to be the parents.

Well, that's easy enough, isn't it? I mean, people in their 20s who are married, they could have dozens of children before it's too late. But no, he picks old people who are barren. What an odd thing for God to do.

Why does he do it? To make it absolutely clear that it is his work and that he can do what he likes and nothing is too wonderful for him at all.

And as if to emphasize the point when he makes the promise initially they're 75 years old, but to make it absolutely certain that we see that this is God's work and his wonder to behold, he waits another 24 years before they even conceive and there are 100 when the child is born.

You see, God is contriving things in a sense, and I don't mean that in an underhanded way, but he's orchestrating the events to show that nothing is too wonderful for him. Nothing is impossible for him.

[28 : 31] He wants his own power and ability to be unquestionable in the world. And there can be no doubt when the child is born that this is the work of God.

And that is how God so often works in scripture. We must marvel at it, but we must see that it shows us clearly that it is God at work. It is God who chooses an inarticulate and ineloquent Moses to approach Pharaoh, the great king of Egypt.

Why doesn't God find somebody who can use words well? But he chooses Moses who cannot string a sentence together in one sense because it shows that God is the God who can do anything wonderful and nothing is impossible for him.

Why does he choose Israel? A bumbling, stupid and failing nation. Why doesn't he choose a better nation? Because it is God's work that is evident in them.

And it is God who picks flawed heroes like Gideon and Samson so that his own ability and power is evident. So the credit doesn't belong to Gideon and Samson and the other heroes or leaders of the nation.

[29 : 44] that it is God for whom nothing is too wonderful and nothing is impossible. And God picks prophets who are afraid like Jeremiah and especially Jonah. Why pick such people?

Why not pick great and influential and powerful and articulate people? People who are bold and courageous. But he picks the fearful people, the weak people, to show that nothing is too wonderful for God.

Nothing is impossible for God. God. And the climax of God's pattern of working in humans and in human history of course, is that he chooses the weakness and the shame of the cross to make it clear that salvation is his work in his way and we can claim no credit at all for it.

And God continues to work in that way, choosing what is weak and despised and in some ways ineffective and inarticulate in the world to show that it is God's wonders that we can behold and that nothing is impossible for him.

So God reiterates the promise in verse 14. He stresses the certainty of what he's already stressed in verse 10. At the set time I will return to you in due season and Sarah shall have a son.

[31 : 01] He can do it and he will. He is saying to Sarah as well as to Abraham. He is able to do the impossible.

He is the God of the impossible. And several times in scripture this theme that all things are possible with God resonates picking up the words that are spoken in this chapter.

So when an old Elizabeth conceives and her son is later to be born as John the Baptist, Luke tells us again these words that nothing is impossible for God.

And when Jesus comments about how hard it is for the rich people to enter into heaven, the disciples say, well who then can be saved? And Jesus' response echoes this statement about God.

With mortals there are lots of impossible things. But with God nothing is impossible. Now we've got to get this doctrine of God right.

[32 : 03] Sometimes we expect too much from God. God's God. Sometimes we expect an instant and obvious answer to every prayer request that we make of God. And we get angry or disillusioned if our prayers do not seem to be answered.

What so often happens is that we fail to discern between what God promises and what he doesn't promise. God is able to do everything but he doesn't promise to do everything.

And the best example of that was in Jesus' words in the garden of Gethsemane the night before he died. He prayed to God words in effect, God all things are possible with you, take this cup from me.

But God didn't. And Jesus drank the cup when he hung on the cross and died. All things are possible.

But God sometimes chooses not to answer those requests. Why? Well in Jesus' case he knew. That in the cross he's able to do far more wonderfully or abundantly than even we can imagine.

[33 : 12] His wonders are bigger than our imagination. But more often than not, our problem is not that we expect too much from God but rather that we expect too little.

We fail to trust that God can deliver on what he promises. That he can answer our prayers. And so our prayers become small. Our visions and hopes become limited and restricted.

Our sights become lowered with what we think that God can and will do. Our building project is far beyond us. The growth of the church is beyond us. The conversion of a friend is never going to happen.

I've prayed for this person for years. I've given up praying because God's obviously not able to change that person's life and bring them to faith. We become reluctant to step out into risky Christian faith.

We keep to the safety of what is likely humanly possible. And our worldview becomes a human worldview and not a godly worldview. And the promises of God seem just too good to be true.

[34 : 22] And so we laugh to ourselves when we read the promises of God. God, just like Abraham laughed in chapter 17 and Sarah here laughed at the promises of God.

God, I don't think you can do that today. Our world is far from being your world. I don't think you have the power to do what you think. And even if we don't consciously think through all those sorts of implications, we laugh to ourselves at the promises of God.

Consider the things that you pray for and you'll see the smallness of your prayers reflect your laughing inside. But as the old saying goes, he who laughs last laughs best.

And within a year, Isaac is born, a child to Sarah and Abraham. And God keeps his promise. But I think in the giving of Isaac, God keeps on laughing, chuckling, smiling to himself.

Not laughing, with hostility at Abraham and Sarah, but laughing because he is the God of the wonderful and nothing is impossible for him.

[35 : 35] And he delivers to Abraham and Sarah what they thought was too good to be true. And he keeps on laughing because the name Isaac means he laughs. Let's pray.

God, you are the God of the impossible. Nothing is too wonderful for you. We confess our failings to appreciate that, to pray aright, to trust in your promises.

Lift our sights, our visions, our understanding of you. Help us to see that you are all knowing and all powerful. Help us to laugh with you and not at your promises.

For Jesus sake, Amen.