

## *The well-founded city*

St Philip's Anglican Church. O'Connor

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*Genesis 15:1-6; Psalm 33:13-21; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40*

Let me ask you, please: “Why are you here?” Not, “Why you are in church this morning?” but, “Why are you in Australia?” What brought you or your family and mine to this land, which, for many of us, is far from our countries of origin?

Most of us, or our forebears, came to seek a new and better life. Even the aboriginal peoples of Australia migrated to this continent many thousands of years ago, looking for a better place. Many migrants have come as ‘New Australians’, seeking new opportunities for work and a good life. Some people, like my grandmother, came for love—she came to marry the handsome Aussie soldier she had met in England. And as we know very well, refugees come to seek freedom from persecution and injustice.

All of these people journeyed in faith and hope that Australia would be a better place for them. So too, almost four thousand years ago, Abram journeyed in faith and hope to a new country.

Abram's father, Terah, set out from Ur in Mesopotamia, with his family, to go to Canaan. But when they arrived at Haran, Terah settled them there instead. Haran is in present-day Turkey, close to the Syrian border; that's some distance both from Ur and from Canaan.

After Terah's death, the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you.” We are told simply that Abram went, as the Lord had commanded, with his family and possessions. We don't know why Terah didn't finish his journey, and we don't know why God spoke to Abram in particular.

The Lord promised Abram two things: land and many descendants. Land and descendants created identity in the ancient world—and still do today in some parts of the world. Abram seems to have been prosperous, but he lacked the future, the destiny, that land and descendants would give him.

Abraham—as he became—set out for a land that he knew of only dimly. What we see in him is *trust*, a strong radical trust in God—a faith that the God who had spoken would also keep God's promises.

Hebrews speaks of faith as, “the assurance of things hoped for” and “the conviction of things not seen” (11.1). Abraham's journey didn't rely on external evidence, but on an inner conviction. It came from an encounter with God and the long relationship that grew from it.

We are told that he, “stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents ... for he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” (vv. 8-10)

This isn't a literal city, but an image of a place that, like an ancient walled city, is prosperous and secure. As a city whose architect and builder is God, it's strong, of glorious design, beautiful, made of the finest materials, and set on everlasting foundations. It speaks of what Abraham sought: a home, a place, and a people.

We read in Hebrews of people of faith who confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, seeking a homeland, no longer thinking of what they had left behind—people

who desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, “God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.”

So there was a natural place of promise, the land of Canaan, and there’s a heavenly or spiritual place of promise—a “city”, a “better country”.

The city of God is mentioned in many places in scripture: as the earthly city of Zion and of Jerusalem, as a metaphor or picture of the church and God’s kingdom here on Earth, and as the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem, in the future and in the life to come.

Christians today can be troubled by talk of “heavenly cities” and leaving our “earthly” home: “pie in the sky by-and-by, when we die”. We worry that such things will distract us from our immediate mission of mercy, justice, healing, peace, freedom and care for creation. For centuries promises of a better life in heaven have been used wrongly to keep the poor and the downtrodden in their place.

Yet, beyond all these important concerns, the heavenly goal is deep within our faith: a promised land, the new city of Jerusalem city, a place of God’s glory and peace. It begins with resurrection—new life and the conquering of death—without which, Paul says, our faith is in vain.

I’m talking about the heavenly city this morning to say that we will be encouraged and strengthened in our everyday walk of faith, the tasks and ministries that we perform week by week, if we have an expectation, a high hope, a vision of faith in God’s coming kingdom.

In today’s Gospel from Luke, Jesus tells us to be like servants waiting late at night for their master to return from a wedding banquet—properly dressed and with the lamps lit, ready for quick action. We are better servants if we know when something is going to happen and are expectant and ready.

Jesus also talks about treasure in heaven: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” We live and work well here if we know that we also do the work of heaven.

Paul says that no one has seen or heard, or conceived in their heart what God has prepared for those who love him, yet God has revealed it to us through the Spirit. (I Cor. 2.9-10).

“Look up!” God is saying to us. “See that I am glorious and my plan for you is beautiful. I am creating and building! I bring you a radiant and glorious future of joy and delight!”

“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” (Jer. 29.11)

Abraham’s journey was empowered—and our journey is empowered—by hope and faith in things better and greater to come. With Abraham we look forward to the “city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”

Our vision is secure, as Abraham’s was, because we seek a future that is designed by God, built by God and founded in God.

We have hope that a better world is not only possible but *will* come.

We have faith that God’s glorious kingdom will come. Alleluiah!