**Third Sunday of Epiphany**

**Genesis 14:17-20**

**17**After Abram returned from defeating Kedorlaomer and the kings allied with him, the king of Sodom came out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King’s Valley).

**18**Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, **19**and he blessed Abram, saying,

“Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
    Creator of heaven and earth.
**20**And praise be to God Most High,
    who delivered your enemies into your hand.”

Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

It was a challenge today. I could have gone for an easier reading, but that from Genesis is one of the rather obscure bits of the story of Abraham or Abram as he was known at that point in the story. The events related here are probably set around 2000BC although the account was probably written very much later on. Until this point Abram appeared to be simply a nomad with some family who has received a sense of God calling him to be something special. Then, in the midst of all of that, we have a bit of an unexpected development. We discover in chapter 14 that Abram is not only the head of a family; he is able to command some men in conflict.

He is just back from defeating a king. The people of Israel haven’t even come into being, There are no 10 commandments, there is no temple or rituals with priests. None of that has been established.

Now this mysterious character Melchizedek appears. We don't know anything about him from beforehand and he disappears afterwards. He is described as the King of Salem, which is widely believed to be Jerusalem (Salem is related to the Hebrew word for peace).

He is also described as priest of the God Most High, who blesses Abram and they share bread and wine. For Christians, that has all sorts of interesting echoes with our celebration of holy communion. We are told that Abraham pays a tribute of a tenth of the goods. In fact, we know later on that he doesn't keep anything, but gives it to his allies. He doesn't want to gain anything from this particular endeavour.

Perhaps it wasn't quite as weird as it might first seem because Abram is called the father of the people of Israel - a group of people who understood their relationship with God to be very special and had a unique understanding of who God was for them. Often they were very protective of the way in which they worshipped God and rejected the way others worshipped. Melchizedek was not one of the people of Israel, and not part of their culture, but he is described as a priest of the God most high and, crucially, Abram shares a table with him and pays him a tribute.

It struck me that perhaps we need to go back to our origins to find reasons to reach out and connect with other people of other outlooks. The example of Melchizedek is used later in the Bible, in the book of Hebrews, as a rather obscure way of explaining Jesus.

This was before Jewish law and rituals being established, but here we have someone who is a stranger and a foreigner, but faithful to the one God. He probably understands God rather differently to Abram and both of them have only a very limited understanding of this point. However, they find a connection as they share bread and wine and he blesses Abram. They share something important that goes beyond the labels that their descendants would carry in future generations.

Sometimes we all have to do that and go back to our origins to remind ourselves that origins our faith have more in common than it might seem when you look at the divisions that exist in the world today. When work was done a number of years ago, revising and looking at all forms of worship that we use in the Church of England they went back to texts, which predated the acrimonious splits between Protestants and Catholics centuries ago and drew inspiration from those.

So perhaps that is the way forward for all of us as we wonder how we can work together in our different Christian traditions. We need to go back to the roots that we have in common and remind ourselves of what is most important.

But, it is also true that Melchizedek’s ministry carried on parallel to the understanding of God that was revealed to Abraham and his people and family as time went on. They worked in parallel. In unity conversations, people talk about convergence – a coming-together in our understanding. But, I once saw a film about big rivers meeting, where they have what is called confluence. They flow together and if the colour of the water is different from the two rivers, that distinctive character carries on quite a long way down the stream - sometimes for several miles. I think Christian unity work needs to be much more like that by remembering that we have some things in common, but also that we have things which are distinctive that we can offer.

If we can find a way of flowing together, rather than trying to make everyone else the same as us, we might find common purpose. So, in this week of prayer of Christian unity, although the story of Abraham is so far removed from us in time and culture, it might still have something to say to us

**A special prayer for today.**

Heavenly father, you have called us in the body of your son, Jesus Christ, to continue his work of reconciliation and reveal you to the world. Forgive us the sentence, which Tara is apart. Give us the courage to overcome our fears and to seek that unity, which is your gift and your will through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit; one God, now and forever. Amen.