

Proper 12 / 6 Trinity Year C – St Helen's, Abingdon
27 July 2025



Genesis 18.20–32 / Colossians 2.6–15, (16–19) / Luke 11.1–13

The mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations
but has now been revealed to his saints.

✝ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – *Amen*

QUESTIONS ABOUND concerning this morning's lesson from Genesis. In the first place, we hear that Abraham converses with the Lord; what was that *like*? Later on in the story, God will tell Moses 'No one can see my face and live', but perhaps that rule hadn't taken effect yet? Or perhaps Abraham was talking to an immortal, *invisible* God (only wise), in light inaccessible hid from his eyes? Further, does one really need to haggle with God? Wouldn't God have made up the divine mind once for all, and not have needed Abraham to negotiate a reduced sentence for the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah?

But these idle queries distract us from what this morning must be the pivotal challenge in this lesson, a challenge as up-to-the-moment as the headlines of the Sunday newspapers. Indeed, the challenge has knocked at the door of our attention for weeks, for *months*, now, and that is: does God actually approve of utterly annihilating cities, or nations, where the enemies of God and God's people may be found?

Scripture provides at least two prominent ways of thinking about the people who oppress the children of Abraham and Sarah, the descendants of Jacob. On one hand, God repeatedly instructs Moses and Joshua to slaughter *everybody* in the territories they conquer — not only men,

women, and children, but even the *livestock*. When Samuel instructed Saul to attack the Amalekites, God went so far as to *punish* Saul for sparing King 'Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good.' Saul objects that he wanted to make them a formal sacrifice to God, but the Almighty wasn't mollified. Because Saul showed even a teensy tiny glimmer of mercy, God rejected him as king over Israel, and sent a evil spirit to torment him.

We can see this pattern in various other situations in the Bible: it doesn't suffice for God's people to *prevail* over their enemies, but they must *wipe them out* altogether. And it's not only in the conquest narratives of the Hebrew Bible; Jesus tells a parable in which the residents of ten cities are exterminated because they didn't want a particular man as their king. The Book of Revelation tells of the four angels whom God sets loose to kill a *third* of humankind, and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse 'were given authority over a *fourth* of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth.' The Bible includes strong, explicit *endorsements* of genocide directed against the enemies of God, and we need to deal with that.

But on the other hand, *other* passages of Scripture repudiate the genocidal impulse. God frequently reminds the people that he is a God of justice and righteousness. The great covenant instructs Israel to 'Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and those in the right, for I will not acquit the guilty.' Indeed, God emphasises that he will *not* overlook the killing of innocent blood. '*Cursed* be anyone who takes a bribe to shed innocent blood.' The Kings of the North show themselves unfit for rule by their readiness to conquer territories around them: 'Manasseh shed very much innocent blood'; and, '[The *wicked*] band together against the life of the righteous, and condemn the innocent to death.' And particularly in this morning's lesson, Abraham reminds God that it would be an incalculable injustice if God were to destroy Sodom

and Gomorrah, so long as righteous people were to die alongside their guilty neighbours. ‘Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?’ Abraham asks. ‘Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?’ And that’s not even *beginning* to consider our Lord’s teaching: ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons and daughters of God.’ ‘Love your enemies, and to do good to those who hate you.’ If Jesus’s title as the ‘Prince of Peace’ means *anything*, it must mean that we his subjects oppose indiscriminate slaughter of non-combatants.

Between these two sets of biblical stories, laws, and teachings, I will not twist your arms to endorse the one that seems most relevant and urgent to me. I will not cite litanies of statistics, nor will I ask ‘*What about X, Y, Z?*’, nor force your conscience with horrifying stories and photos. I *will* ask you to search your hearts to find an informed position that you can live with, that you can look the people of *both* Israel *and* Gaza in the eyes and say, ‘This I believe, and this is *why*, and this is what I’m doing about it.’

For thousands of years, the descendants of Jacob have suffered bigotry, terror, and murder — often at the hands of Christians — and within the last century, still within living memory, they have survived genocidal violence. *No one* should underestimate the weight of that innocent suffering on the hearts of the righteous. So this morning we read and listen with the ears of *our* hearts to the words of Abraham, addressing God and speaking to our own consciences, our prayers and policies: ‘Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked.... Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?’



In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit—

Amen