

Influencers: Abraham

Who influences you? Who, by the things that they do or say, has an effect on how you live your life? It might be someone who you are close to – your family, your friends, your teachers, your work colleagues – or it might be someone you have never met – a celebrity, someone in power or someone you read about in the news. In our culture there are now people whose job it is to be an influencer. These influencers are paid to affect the views that others have and how they choose to spend their money. With the growth of social media influencers are now able to reach large numbers of followers who pay close attention to what these influencers say and share via their social media channels and are encouraged to buy the products that these influencers are paid to promote.

Over the next 3 weeks we are going to look at some influencers from the bible, people who through the way that they lived their lives – the things that they did and the things that they said – influenced not just those around them but those who came after them right through to the present day and will continue to influence others in the future.

Today we start with Abraham – the man described by the apostle Paul as the forefather of all who believe and the father of the Abrahamic religions. So we can see already some of the influence he has today but if we look at his life, we see why he is included so prominently in this chapter we read from which some have nicknamed the “Hall of Faith” and why he could teach modern day influencers a thing or two!

Hebrews is a letter from an unknown author to a group of Hebrew Christians who were struggling with this young faith. In this part of the letter the writer has been instructing the Hebrews in how to live a life of faith and so cites examples of those who have demonstrated faith through history. Amongst all of these names, Abraham stands out – his name is mentioned 10 times in the book of Hebrews and his example of faith is the longest in this passage, showing the influence that he continued to have a long time after he lived.

For those who want to read the story of Abraham, it is found in Genesis, the first book of the bible and starts at chapter 12 with God calling Abraham to “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you”. And it tells us that that is what Abraham did – he left, as God has commanded him. Demonstrating faith – not just by believing in God and in his promises, but by obeying him and putting that belief into action. And one of the reasons why the writer of Hebrews cites Abraham as an example - and why he should continue to influence us today - is that he went where God led, even though he did not know where he was going.

God calls us to follow where he leads us, but often we will not know where he is leading us when we start the journey and that can be really scary – to follow him might mean we have to give up something in our lives or to do something or go somewhere outside of our comfort zone. Some of you will have heard me say before that faith is actually a 4 letter word because it is spelt R-I-S-K, which comes from a quote by the American pastor John Wimber. To follow God can sometimes mean taking risks – not for the sake of taking them but because it is what God calls us to. Throughout the bible we see women and men demonstrating their faith and trust in God’s promise by leaving their comfort zones and accepting God’s risky call – think of Peter walking on the water, Esther standing up to the King to save the Jews, David facing Goliath. Abraham faced that choice – the choice between staying where he was – where his family, his home and his belongings were - and leaving on a journey with an unknown destination. Between the certainty of what he had and

the uncertainty of where God was calling him. And he chose to take the risk, because of his faith in God. At that stage he did not understand how God was going to keep his promise to make him into a great nation or that Jesus, one of his descendants would be the saviour for the world. All he knew was that God would keep the promise that he had made, so he followed where he led.

If, like Abraham, God called us to move out of our comfort zone, to take a risk, I wonder how we would react. The pastor Mark Labberton wrote that "...often the Church can be one of the least risk-taking communities. We cultivate a subculture that is often about avoiding risk...with the justification that Jesus has taken the risk [and] spared us the danger." Is that where we are – we feel that God won't call us to take risks, that Abraham's example is not one we need to follow? I am afraid if that is what you think then I have to disavow you of that idea. Faith is more than just believing, it is being prepared to put that belief into action like Abraham, by following God where he leads us even when we don't know where our ultimate destination is.

And the route of following God is not always the easiest route to take - we see in the story of Abraham that he faced tests during his journey – we have talked already about what he had to give up to follow God and he would be further tested during his journey – a journey which would see him cover a distance of about 400 miles! His ultimate test would come when he is commanded by God to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice – but even in this test Abraham demonstrates his faith because he is so sure in God's promise that he would be the Father of a great nation, that he believed if Isaac is sacrificed, God would be able to bring him back from the dead and as a result Isaac is spared.

Many of us will face tests to our faith during the journey that God calls us to make in our lives, tests that challenge our faith in God and cause us to question our belief and God's promise to us but in all of these we should not lose sight of the promise that God has made to us – an even more amazing promise because in it Christ offers to forgive our sins and bring us to God through his sacrificial death and instead of being limited to the descendants of Abraham – God's new promise is made available to all of us.

If we can follow Abraham's example and continue to live our life in faith, despite the challenges and tests that we face, then God will continue to guide us and lead us, through Christ, to the place he has set aside for us in his heavenly kingdom.

At this point, I want to emphasise that I am not trying to play down the tests that we face in our lives – I know that the challenges that we face in life can be difficult and can take us to the darkest places where it feels like no light can get in – but even in those places the light of God cannot be extinguished and continues to guide us to where he is leading us.

And there will be times that we think we know best and make our own path – Genesis tells us that there were times when Abraham's faith wavered and doubt led him to try to take things into his own hands and goes in a direction he thinks best even though it isn't where God was leading him, and yet God keeps bringing him back to the path he has for him and keeps his promise to him.

While Abraham did make it to Canaan, the land God has promised, he lived there as a foreigner, a stranger and it would be many generations before his descendants received this promised land but verse 16 tells us that they never lost their vision of "a better country - a heavenly one". We can become frustrated when we believe in Christ, because what we want, expect or demand, is not given to us immediately and so we can become impatient and in some cases give up. Are you discouraged because you feel that God isn't keeping his promises to you or you are worried because you don't know where God is leading you? We should take courage from the example of Abraham, a man whose living faith influenced both the apostle Paul in our call to worship and the author of

Hebrews hundreds of generations later and was used as an example to influence the Hebrew Christians in how to live faithfully. Abraham didn't know where his journey was going to take him and certainly couldn't have imagined how much his decision to leave his home and travel where God led him would have on the world and how much influence it would continue to have so that we are still talking about it millennia later. We probably don't know the long-term influence most decisions we make will have and it might not be that they lead to a great nation or that people will be talking about it in a year never mind 1000s of years from now but in the decisions we make we should follow Abraham's example and be guided by our faith in God even if it involves taking risks or travelling in directions we don't understand and like Abraham, we should remain focussed on God's promise to us and be confident that, through Christ, it is a promise that God keeps.