

ABRAHAM

A Meditation For Religious

Holy obedience is the subject I would treat next, because it so surrounds and conditions the priestly life that we must needs consider the conduct of our lives and the eternal salvation of our souls in relation to it and in conformity with it. I might derive a lesson on the subject from almost any part of the Bible, whether in the Old or in the New Testament. But it seems convenient for my purpose to keep to the order of historical narration, and discuss the virtue of obedience under the figure of the patriarch Abraham. From the very moment when he appears on the stage of history, Abraham meets us as a man with a vocation. Almost as soon as his name has been mentioned, we read: “Meanwhile, the Lord said to Abraham, Leave thy country behind thee, thy kinsfolk, and thy father’s home, and come away into a land I will shew thee. Then I will make a great people of thee.” God has a use for him, and a promise to make to him; but all that is conditional upon a blind act of obedience; which involves saying goodbye to all the surroundings and associations which have bounded his life hitherto. And his life henceforward is that of a wanderer. “And he to whom the name of Abraham was given, shewed faith when he left his home, obediently, for the country which was to be his inheritance; left it without knowing where his journey would take him. Faith taught him to live as a stranger in the land he had been promised for his own, encamping there with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of a common hope.” Dwelling in tents; here today, he has packed up and gone elsewhere tomorrow; he has no ties to bind him; he moves, at every turn, in obedience to a command from the divine will.

Let us remember this first, that God did not call Abraham all at once; there were stages in the process. His first home; the place in which he grew up and married, was not Haran, but Ur of the Chaldees; he was already a man when his father, Thare, emigrated to Haran from Ur. Why he emigrated the Bible doesn’t tell us; but I believe that these people who are digging up the remains of Ur may yet throw some light on it. There certainly was a very early civilization at Ur, which was very early obliterated; I think the reason they give for it is that there was some shifting in the course of the rivers; and, when the water supply was no longer available, the great city of Ur was simply abandoned, and left a ruin for the desert sands to cover it. So far, then, God is dealing with his chosen servant forcibly, without giving him any choice in the matter. He takes him away from the scenes of his youth and from his ancestral traditions willy-nilly, asking no consent from his will. How often that happens, that God has to give us an exterior call, which we are forced to obey whether we like it or not, so as to uproot us from the entanglements that would otherwise make it difficult for us to follow his guidance! How often we have to look back and say, If it was not for this and that, circumstances over which I had no control, I wonder if I should ever have found the strength and the courage to do what God wanted me to do!

And then comes the interior vocation, which calls for a fresh move, a fresh uprooting from old habits. “Leave thy country behind thee, thy kinsfolk, and thy father’s home” – the first kind of response which this vocation needs is detachment in embracing it. “And come into the land

which I will shew thee” – the second response is perseverance in pursuing it. “And I will make of thee a great nation” – the third response is faith to believe in it. Let us trace those three kinds of response, as God found them in his servant Abraham, and hopes to find them in us, whom he has called to serve him in a special way.

We are so accustomed nowadays to the idea of young men setting out to earn their own living, usually in the colonies because there is no room for them at home, that we don’t realize, all at once, the sacrifice which Abraham was called upon to make, in leaving all the ties of home behind him. We have to throw ourselves back into a patriarchal age, when men lived a clan life, and families kept together generation after generation. When Abraham wanted a wife later on for his son Isaac, he felt compelled to send all the way back to Haran to find a cousin for him to marry; he would not have him wedded to a stranger. It meant, then, a strong effort of detachment if he was to separate himself from his clan and all that went with it. He had not, perhaps, lived very long in Haran, but it had become a home to him – so prehensile are our affections that it takes us only a short time to find ourselves at home in the country of our adoption; that home must be left behind. His father’s house carried with it, doubtless, a certain rank, a certain hope of founding a race of chieftains; that hope must be left behind. All that force of tradition, which stands for so much in the lives of people simpler and more primitive than ourselves, was to be put behind him, was to go for nothing.

Now, in the souls which he calls to serve him in holy religion, God asks for a spirit of detachment from home and family life. It is true that he does not call upon us for a complete separation, except in the strictly enclosed orders. But the spirit of detachment is there; your place at the fireside is not your own place any longer; you have become almost a guest when you are at home. And meanwhile, you have relinquished the common human instinct of perpetuating the family, and the family fortunes, and the family traditions. You have become a member of a spiritual family instead; your cares henceforth, and your ambitions, and your service belong to the life which you have entered. All that belongs to the essence of your state; and if you are to be faithful to the spirit of your vocation, you will see to it that this transference of your loyalties is a reality, not a mere convention; that you are really detached, really heart-free, to make the walls of your religious house your new home.

“And come away into a land I will shew thee” – notice that gracious change of verb; “come”, not “go”; God does not *send* Abraham away, he *beckons* him away; the change of verb brings with it the promise of a divine companionship. And yet it remains true that the demand made on Abraham’s obedience is a severe one; he is to go into a land, not named, which God will shew him later on. He went forth, not knowing whither he went; he must take his orders from day to day, must not indulge his curiosity about his mysterious destination. And meanwhile there was a journey to be made, a distant journey; he is called upon, therefore, for perseverance, for physical and mental energy, to embrace the hardships of a pilgrimage. He will be led on stage by stage, not always by the direct paths he himself would have chosen; he will be a nomad, never settling

down and sowing crops for next year, but driving his cattle from one pasture-ground to another, always on the move. The divine voice will always be urging him on, “Further, further, not here!”

From all souls without exception, God asks obedience to his direct commands. But when a soul enters religion, it becomes the subject thenceforward to his indirect commands, to the prescriptions laid down for it by superiors. There will be no question of mapping out a policy for yourself, of indulging private ambitions; there will be no security of tenure, even when you are engaged upon some kind of work for which you believe yourself peculiarly fitted, which you are doing, so it seems, better than anyone else could do it. You have relinquished your own liberty of choice; and at the same time you are called upon to shew all the perseverance which men commonly use in following out their own plans, while you are following out the plans of another. You draw a blank cheque upon your powers of obedience, and pay it away, when you enter holy religion.

“Into a land I will shew thee” – it is a strange country into which the divine vocation invites you; a life of closer union with God himself, your familiar landmarks of sense and of self-pleasing left behind you. Come, not go; it is a welcome, not a sentence of exile. But if it is to be a welcome, not a sentence of exile, that means that you must embrace the clerical state not merely as a means of doing God’s work more efficiently, with more concentration, than you would otherwise find possible. It means that your own spiritual life is to be an advance, a drawing nearer to God through ways that he himself will shew you, unfolding progressively his purpose for your sanctification. He has detached you from your worldly ties only that you may be drawn the closer to him.

“Then I will make a great people of thee” – it needed faith for Abraham to believe that. All his instincts of prudence must have told him that if he wished to found a great people he must stay where he was; must take advantage of the territory he already possessed and the cultivation he had already put into it, instead of venturing out on the trackless wastes of the Arabian desert; must avail himself of the alliances he had already formed, instead of risking ill-will amongst strangers. What likelihood was there that a nomad tribe, such as his descendants must needs be, would ever achieve the political stability, ever win the material resources, from which a great people could be built up? “Encamping there with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of a common hope” – could he foresee, then, the proud empire of Solomon, his navies, and his tribute? Could he foresee, still further hidden in the mysterious purposes of God, the redemption of the world by means of the Christian Church? He only knew that God had great destinies for his posterity, which would surely be fulfilled. As he lived in tents, he looked forward to a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

God does not hold out to us such high hopes as that. It is not for everybody, only for a chosen few, that these sublime destinies are foreshadowed. But our vocation does mean this – that God undertakes to make our lives far more useful, far more effective, if we will serve him in this way, than if we refuse our vocation and insist upon serving him in our own way. We might have done

good in the world, we might have promoted his glory by following our natural bent, by developing our natural talents, in some laudable worldly way of life. But it is certain that we shall do more good in the world, that we shall promote his glory still more effectively, by coming out into the land which he will shew us. And this is hard, sometimes; for, after all, it is only our faith which can assure us of it. The priest can see opportunities which he might have embraced, work which he might have done, but for his priesthood; the religious can see similar opportunities, similar openings, which might have been for him if it had not been for his vows of religion. And all that vision of what might have been we must hide away, resolutely turn our backs upon it. We have heard the voice of him who called us, and we know that his way is best, his will for us the only thing that matters.

You see, obedience to our vocation does not begin and end when we take the irrevocable step which commits us to it. The priest when he is ordained, the religious when he takes his solemn vows, has not completed the sacrifice of obedience; he has only begun it. That lesson, too, you may read in the story of Abraham. You may read how the act of obedience which enabled him to leave his kindred and his father's house developed into a habit of obedience, which enabled him to follow at every turn the indications of God's will. And there are, I suppose, three fruits of obedience, three tests by which the habit may be known, all of which we can read in Abraham's career. One is the instinct of preferring not to choose for yourself, of feeling safer when the choice is left to another. The second is patience when your work seems to go unrewarded. And the third is a willingness to sacrifice your most cherished hopes, however necessary they may seem to the fulfilment of God's purpose for you, if it becomes clear that God has some other plan for you instead.

The reluctance to choose for oneself – Abraham did not, after all, have to separate himself at once from his kindred. He was accompanied, on the first stage of his journey, by his nephew Lot, who, like Abraham himself, had flocks and herds in his possession, and a little clan of retainers who kept those flocks and herds for him. It was not till they had already reached the land of Chanaan that ill-feeling broke out between the two petty clans, between the herdsmen of Abraham and the herdsmen of Lot, and it became necessary for the two to separate. Their ways must part; and it does not appear that Almighty God gave any directions at this juncture in Abraham's fortunes. What does Abraham do? He relinquishes the right of choice to his junior; Lot may take which part of the country he pleases, and leave the rest to him. And Lot, as you would expect, makes the world's choice. Lifting up his eyes, he saw all the country round about the Jordan, which was watered throughout, before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrhah, as the paradise of the Lord. Fertile plains, that fringed the deep lake into which Jordan flows – these, instinctively, were Lot's choice; he left to Abraham the barren uplands and the desert of the south. He could not foresee that night of terror, when the Lord rained fire and brimstone upon the cities of the Plain, when all the fruits of his industry would be buried by a cataclysm of nature. Lot chose, and chose wrong; Abraham refused his right of decision, and found safety in the refusal.

Now, it is quite certain that it is no good embracing a life of obedience, if it is your intention to get your own way, by hook or by crook, all the time. If it is your intention to drop hints and to pull wires, so that you are almost certain of getting the kind of work you like, the kind of position for which you personally believe yourself to be suited, then the clerical state is hardly the place for you. Your influence will be one of unsettlement, your atmosphere one of intrigue; unhappiness will result, if not positive scandal. It is terrible to think how much harm is done in the Church of God, how much disedification arises, how much loss of spirituality, from the desire of self-advancement which sometimes lives under the cassock of the priest, even under the habit of the religious. And the spirit of obedience, for which we ought all to pray, is so terrified of this fatal example that it prefers, at all times and in all emergencies, to refuse the opportunity of choosing for itself; to be guided either by superiors or by the wisdom of a prudent director. Lot chooses, and takes his part with Sodom and Gomorrha; Abraham refuses the choice, and becomes the father of many nations.

But a fresh trial awaits him. He grows old, and his wife Sarah grows old; and he, to whom a glorious posterity has been promised, has no legitimate heir to succeed him. It is not wonderful if he cries out to God in the bitterness of his heart, Oh that Ishmael might live before thee! Oh, that Ishmael, the illegitimate child, with his rugged strength and his fierce independence of character, might become the heir to God's promises, might be counted to Abraham for his seed! But no, God will not permit such an expedient; the son of the bondwoman shall not inherit; Abraham must wait until in God's good time, beyond all natural expectation, a child is born to Sarah in her old age. The lesson of that is not difficult to read, a lesson of patience. We shall find our work, the work enjoined upon us by our superiors, tedious and barren of any visible result; we shall be tempted to take up side lines, to lose ourselves in our hobbies, and make our spare-time work the work of our lives. But it is not for that that God called us to holy obedience. He wants us to wait; to work for results, which we, perhaps, shall never see, content to recognize that this is his will because he has enjoined it.

And then comes to Abraham – it may come to us – the hardest trial of all. “Take now thy son, thy only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and offer him for a burnt offering.” We have waited so long and so patiently and at last the results have begun to shew; the work which seemed so ungrateful at first has become light to us, because we find we are doing it well, doing it better, perhaps, than anyone else available could do it. And then the voice of our superiors, which to us is God's voice, calls upon us to make a double sacrifice; to give up the work we loved, and to give it up into hands, it seems, less capable than our own – to ruin it! Oh, that is hard, and we shall need Abraham's faith to believe, what is certainly true, that neither we nor our work will be the losers for this act of sacrifice. Fortify yourself, if such a trial comes to you, with that picture from the Old Testament. There stands the mount of vision; and on the mountain a man, old and well stricken in years, who holds a knife to a boy's throat. That boy is his only son; is the direct ancestor of our Lord Jesus Christ. My son, says Abraham, God will provide a lamb for the burnt offering. He will provide, he will provide.

Ronald Knox, 'A Retreat For Priests'