

Genesis 14:1-24

Introduction

What happens on the big stage of international relations inevitably has knock on effects in the daily lives of ordinary people. We're seeing that in the world today. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has had repercussions not only in Ukraine but all around the world. Trump's love of trade wars is said to be Lose-Lose for everyone. When international relations break down, the lives of ordinary people are affected. And that was certainly the case in the days of Abram. Our passage this morning *begins with* a breakdown in international relations. We're told about an extensive military campaign *that follows*. And we find Abram getting caught up in the middle of it. It's the only report we have in the Bible of Abram as a warrior. And it's the story of a courageous rescue, which is our first heading.

A courageous rescue

The passage begins by taking us back in time, about 14 years earlier, when an alliance of four Mesopotamian kings, led by Kedorlaomer king of Elam, had defeated the kings of the five cities around the Dead Sea and subjugated them.

Alliances of kings like this are a well-known feature of Mesopotamian history. And it's easy to see what motivated them. It's money. The Jordan Valley was on a major trade route between Syria and Egypt. It was a strategic location. There were riches to be had for anyone who could control that strip of land. They could impose lucrative taxes on the many traders who travelled between Asia and Africa. And at the same time, tributes could be collected from the cities they had subjugated. *Our* focus is on five cities located around the southern end of the Dead Sea, one of which we've already heard about. It's Sodom. And we're told in verse 4 that: **For twelve years they had been subject to Kedorlaomer, but in the thirteenth year they rebelled.**

For twelve years, the kings of these five cities had paid tribute to Kedorlaomer. But then they decided they'd had enough. In the thirteenth year they stopped. It's likely that other cities in the region did the same, because their actions prompt an extensive military campaign. In the fourteenth year, the alliance of the four Mesopotamian kings come again. They sweep down the eastern side of the Dead Sea until they reach the Gulf of Aqaba. Then they turn back toward Kadesh before changing direction and coming to the Valley of Siddim, an area which nowadays is submerged under the southern end of the Dead Sea. This is where battle lines are drawn up. For the second time, the five kings of the Dead Sea are defeated. Their men escape to the hills, some falling into bitumen pits as they flee. The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah seem to fare the worst. The four kings of Mesopotamia seize all their possessions, all their food and all their people, including Abram's Nephew Lot. Then they head north and begin the long trek home. We can imagine they would have been delighted. They had executed their plan perfectly. The rebellion had been successfully put

down. And now they could look forward to returning home and sharing out the plunder. Little did they know...

Look at verse 13.

A man who had escaped came and reported this to Abram the Hebrew. Now Abram was living near the great trees of Mamre the Amorite, a brother of Eshkol and Aner, all of whom were allied with Abram. When Abram heard that his relative had been taken captive, he called out the 318 trained men born in his household and went in pursuit as far as Dan. During the night Abram divided his men to attack them and he routed them, pursuing them as far as Hobah, north of Damascus. He recovered all the goods and brought back his relative Lord and his possessions, together with the women and the other people.

Abram sets off in pursuit with his 318 trained men. To have a fighting force of that size in your household indicates how wealthy Abram had become and how big his household had grown. Yet a force of 318 is still small compared to the armies of the alliance. Nonetheless, Abram catches up with the Mesopotamian kings near Dan. He divides his men into smaller units, attacks under the cover of darkness and routs them. He chases the Mesopotamians further north, past Damascus and away from the land. The four kings flee, leaving all the plunder behind, including Lot and all the people he had taken.

It's a stunning victory. In fact, it's such a stunning victory that it can only be God's work. There's nothing to indicate that this victory is down to *Abram*. This is all *God's* doing. We're to see God's hand at work, delivering Abram's enemies into his hand, with just 318 men. Abram's learning that God can be depended on. He is *powerful*. And he does the unlikely. It's a lesson we all too quickly forget when we face unpromising circumstances of our own. It's a message I need to keep reminding *myself* of, for example, as we try to appoint a Youth & Families Worker when, nationally, there doesn't seem to be enough of them to go around. It's a lesson we need to remember particularly as we think of our own friends and family, who we long to see rescued from the hands of Satan. It might seem that the chances are slim. But there are no such things as unfavourable odds when God's involved. Time and time again, we see in the Bible that God makes a habit of doing the unlikely. And that knowledge should give us confidence to act courageously, like Abram.

But this courageous rescue is merely the backdrop for what follows.

Look at verse 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).

If this were a movie, there would be dramatic music at this point. Abram's walking straight into another test of his faith. And that's our next heading: another test.

Another test

But before we hear what the king of Sodom has to say, we're introduced to a second king, who mysteriously intervenes. Please look down again at verse 18.

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

'Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of Heaven and Earth. And praise be to God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.'

Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

This is a mysterious encounter, which seems to come out of nowhere. The name Melchizedek means, 'king of righteousness'. And we're told that he's the king of Salem, which is almost certainly Jerusalem. Salem means 'peace'. So this Melchizedek is the king of righteousness and the king of peace. He's clearly superior to Abram. That's evident in the fact that he blesses Abram, and that Abram gives him a tenth of everything. And he appears to be a believer in the *God* of Abram. Certainly, Abram identifies the God Most High, whom Melchizedek praises, with the Lord, in verse 22. It raises the tantalising possibility that Abram has just come across another believer, who lives in Jerusalem as both priest and king. What are we to make of all this?

Well, the New Testament encourages us to make a big deal of it. It describes Melchizedek as a kind of prototype Christ.

Many years ago, when I was training to be an accountant, I was part of a team that audited the Nissan manufacturing plant in Sunderland. Most audits took a few days. This one took weeks. It was massive. But one of the highlights was to go and see the research and development facilities. The staff would show us prototypes of the latest models of Nissan cars, that hadn't hit the market yet. The prototypes weren't the car itself. They were merely examples that exhibited the essential features of a car that was coming.

And that's how we're to view Melchizedek. He isn't Christ. But he is a kind of *prototype* Christ. He exhibits the essential features of the Christ to come.

For a start, he is both priest and king. We're told that he's priest of God Most High. He's the first priest we meet in the Bible. The Old Testament priesthood, which we may be more familiar with, is descended from Abram through Aaron and Levi. Those people haven't been born yet. Melchizedek represents a different order of priesthood altogether. And we're told that he's king of Salem, or Jerusalem. He's both priest and king.

David would be the first Israelite to sit on Melchizedek's throne, in Jerusalem. But he would do so only as king, not as priest. Yet in Psalm 110, David looks forward to a day when the joining together of priest and king would be repeated once again. He looks forward to the

reign of a future king, to whom God will say, **'You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek.'**

There was a greater Melchizedek to come, who would be both priest and king. And that's Jesus. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that God spoke the words of Psalm 110 to Jesus. In Hebrews chapter 5, verses 5 and 6, it says: **But God said to him,**

'You are my Son; today I have become your Father.'

And he says in another place,

'You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek.'

That's Psalm 110.

Again, it says, in chapter 6, verse 20: **He has become a high priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek.**

That's Psalm 110 again!

There are two priests in the order of Melchizedek. The first was Melchizedek. The second and greater is Jesus. He is our high priest, who gave himself as an atoning sacrifice for sin on the cross, securing our peace with God through his perfect righteousness. And he is our king, who rose again and ascended to the throne of the universe, where he reigns as Lord of all.

Melchizedek points us to Jesus as priest and king. But he also points us to Jesus through another intriguing detail in Genesis. Genesis is a book that meticulously records genealogies. It's full of genealogies. We know about the ancestry of all the significant characters in Genesis, as well as details of their deaths. Yet, that's all missing for Melchizedek. We know nothing of his ancestry. Nor of his death. Why is that? Again, the writer to the Hebrews tells us. In chapter 7, verse 3, it says this: **Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest for ever.** I don't think we're to take that literally. Melchizedek was a normal person just like you and me. I assume he had a birthday, which he might have celebrated each year. And that he died. But in the way he's described in Genesis, with neither beginning nor end, he resembles Jesus, the Son of God. Jesus lives eternally. He's alive in heaven, where he intercedes for ever for all who come to God through him.

And that's why Melchizedek's superiority to Abram is significant. The priests that would be descended from Abram didn't live for ever. There were thousands of them. When one died, they needed to be replaced. But Melchizedek points us to a better priest, Jesus, who lives forever as our priest and king in heaven.

That's how Melchizedek serves as a prototype Christ. And here's why that's so important to understand. It's because, as we return to his role in the story in Genesis, we learn from him how Jesus exercises his priestly ministry for us today. Look at how the story ends.

Remember, Abram is heading straight into an encounter with the king of Sodom, who's coming out to meet him. That meeting will be a test of Abram's faith. But before it can happen, Melchizedek has appeared. He has refreshed Abram with bread and wine, strengthening him for what lies ahead. And he has blessed Abram, assuring him that God is with him, and giving him the encouragement he needs to remain faithful. And then we get to verse 21. Here's the test of Abram's faith. It's a battle of faith. And, if anything, it's a far more significant battle than the one he's just fought with the four kings of Mesopotamia.

Verse 21: The king of Sodom said to Abram, 'Give me the people and keep the goods for yourself.'

That's the test right there. And he's got a nerve! Abram already had the right to claim the plunder as the one who had recovered it. But nonetheless, the king of Sodom offers him a deal: **'Give me the people and keep the goods for yourself.'**

Goods from Sodom would have been the ultimate in luxury at the time. They represent all that was desirable. The king of Sodom is tempting Abram to make the same mistake that Lot made: to live by sight rather than faith, to put his confidence in material prosperity rather than God. But Abram will have none of it.

Verse 22.

But Abram said to the king of Sodom, 'With raised hand I have sworn an oath to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the strap of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, "I made Abram rich." I will accept nothing but what my men have eaten and the share that belongs to the men who went with me – to Aner, Eshkol and Mamre. Let them have their share.'

Do you find anything ironic in those words?

When Abram was in Egypt, he seemed happy to let Pharaoh make him rich. He left Egypt a wealthy man, largely due to the dowry he'd received as the bride-price for Sarai. He hadn't had any scruples *then*. But now, something's changed. His thinking has been turned on its head. How did that happen? Well, surely, it's significant that he's just met Melchizedek. Presumably there was more to their encounter than has been recorded here. Presumably they had a conversation. And I wonder whether we're meant to see that Melchizedek prepared Abram for this meeting with the king of Sodom.

It's tempting to imagine what this king of righteousness and peace might have said. Might he have warned Abram that the king of Sodom was about to tempt him to put his faith in worldly possessions rather than God? Might he have explained to Abram that not every source of wealth is righteous? Might he have exhorted Abram to depend only on God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, as the ultimate source of true wealth?

After all, isn't that what Jesus did, when he encouraged his disciples not to worry about what they will eat and drink and wear. Your heavenly Father knows that you need these things, he said. And then he said, **'But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.'** (Matt. 6:33)

Well, we can't know for sure.

But what we do know is that Melchizedek came to Abram in his time of need and strengthened him. He refreshed Abram when he was weary and assured him of God's blessing. And Abram's faith in God was fortified. He trusted God to provide for his needs and said No to the king of Sodom. Thanks to Melchizedek, Abram responded to his time of testing with faith not failure.

It's a lovely picture of Christ's work in us and for us. He is reigning in heaven as our eternal priest-king. When we are weary and tempted, he comes to us in his word and by his Spirit to refresh and strengthen us. When we share bread and wine, as we're about to do in a moment, and feed on him in our hearts by faith, he graciously renews and blesses us. He assures of the peace we have with God, through his atoning sacrifice on the cross. And he strengthens us, so that we too might meet our own times of testing with faith not failure.

He is our gracious and compassionate King. As he comes to us, our response must be to come to him, and to keep coming to him, by faith, for help.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you for Jesus. Thank you that he comes to us through your word, and through the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper, to strengthen us for the life of faith. Please help us to keep reading your word and gathering together with your people to be strengthened by him. And as we do, please help us to live for your glory in the world. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.