The Promise to Abraham
Genesis 22:17

Let me ask you a question: what makes you feel small? Maybe somebody says something to you that's cutting or cruel, and they ridicule you and put you down. And if you've experienced that, it can be a very unpleasant. We even have a word for it: belittling - 'be little.'

But there are other things that can make you feel very small but at the same time make your heart feel big because they fill you with awe. Like you get away from the city's lights, and look up into the night sky and see the stars and the immensity of vast expanse of the universe leaves you speechless.

Speechless, and slightly unnerved. Because you know that in comparison to what you're seeing you are a tiny dot.

But what if those stars didn't just make you feel small, they also made you feel secure? And loved and caught up in the greatest story ever? Because that's what our song from earlier was telling us: 'Consider the stars in the sky, umbrella to hide in, a dance floor of heaven.' Where do they get that idea from?

Well, over the Advent period, we're looking at some of the promises that God made to certain individuals in the Old Testament. Promises that help explain what's going on at the first Christmas. And one of those promises was to Abraham. We heard it earlier in our second reading: 'I will **surely** bless you, and I will **surely** multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven… and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed' (Gen 22:17).

So God promises to bless Abraham, and multiply his descendants and that one of those descendants will bless the whole world. It's why when Matthew begins his account of Jesus' birth by saying, 'The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ… the son of Abraham' (Matt 1:1) our ears should prick up. Because it's Matthew's way of saying, 'the Offspring of Abraham, the One through whom the whole world is going to be blessed, has come.'

But what does it mean to be blessed? Because you might even use that word over the coming season mightn't you? Maybe you get to spend time with family or friends and think, 'I'm blessed to have such people in my life.' Maybe some dreaded holiday get-together works out better than you expected and you think, 'phew! what a blessing!' Or maybe, kids, your aunt or uncle, the crazy one in the family, gives you get a great present, that makes loads of noise, and above the noise you hear your parents go, 'Uncle Jeremy, he's such a blessing!'

So what blessing has Christ come to bring? Because obviously it's not going to be the blessing of great presents or even a secure job, or a nice house, or a loving family, great as those blessings are.

Well, when Joseph discovers that Mary's pregnant and he knows he's not the dad, he plans to divorce her, until an angel says to him, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, *for he will save his people from their sins*" (Matt 1:20-21).

So imagine all your sins. All those things you think, say, and do that you know you shouldn't; or don't think, and say, and do, that you know you should. Those things you feel guilty about or would be ashamed of if anyone else knew about. What if every last one of those was forgiven, now and in

the future, and all record of them before God was wiped clean? Wouldn't that be a blessing? Or what if God - who knows everything about you - instead of seeing you and his anger being roused against you, were to see you and love you, and smile upon you, and accept you, and welcome you and provide in every way for you, now and for ever? That would be a blessing, wouldn't it?

And Matthew is saying, 'yes, and it's to bring that blessing that Jesus has come.'

And yet… who's it for? Because Joseph's told 'he will save *his people* from their sins'. And you can read that and think, 'oh, ok, so this promise is for Jesus' Jewish compatriots, the descendants of Abraham. I was hoping for something broader, something that might include me. But no, we're talking local and parochial. Blessing for ethnic insiders, but not for me.'

Until the Magi, the wise men, turn up in Jerusalem. And they're members, almost certainly, of the Babylonian astrologer-priest class. And if you were a Jewish person living in Jesus' day, they were the ultimate religious and ethnic outsiders. And yet, they come, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? *For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him*" (Matt 2:2)."

So they too have been looking at the night sky and seen something that reminds them of how small they are. Something that tells them someone far greater has come. And yet that someone is worthy of hearts filled with awe. And when they find him, Matthew tells us, 'they fell down and worshipped him' (Matt 2:11).

And as you watch them, you begin to realise that 'the people of Christ' Matthew's referring to is much broader than any group of ethnic insiders. That the promise God made to Abraham of descendants more numerous than the stars, doesn't just include *physical* descendants but spreads so wide that it includes Babylonians and Persians and Greeks and Romans and Indians and Africans and Americans, and you and me. Anyone who puts their trust in Christ the way Abraham trusted God. And when you do, you too get to share in the blessing of sins forgiven.

You see, when you look up into the night sky and see those stars, and feel small and yet awestruck, it's an invitation. An invitation to trust and an invitation to worship. Not the stars, but the One who made them. The One who came and was born under them. That in a time of pride and division, you can know something and someone that humbles you, that brings you down to size. But in a right way.

Because he came low, to lift you up. Not to be a twinkly star, but a part of the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham. To know you are loved and secure in his hands. Because Christmas tells you that Offspring of Abraham, through whom the world is blessed, has come. So come and share the blessing.