**24th February 2013**

**Genesis 17.1-7**

Some parents leave their children with quite a legacy when they name them. How about these names:

Sue Age

Constant Pain

Dwain Pipes

Nancy Boys

Al Dente

Minnie Bar

Kitty Litter

Holly Berry

Pearly Gates

Rick O’Shea

Pete Sake

Jimmy Riddle

There are a lot ruder ones!

I personally knew a boy with the Surname of Longbottom – his first name Ivor.

Names are important. Names can suggest people’s destinies or significance or say something about their parent’s prayers for them. When Debbie and I were expecting our third child we didn’t know the sex but one night I was reading a bed time story to Joanna and it was the story of the birth of Samuel in the Bible and I just felt sure we would have a boy and we had to call him Samuel which means ‘I asked God for him’.

The lent course is looking at the story of Peter and of course Peter had his name changed from Simon to Peter by Jesus to denote a new purpose in his life.

Bishop Michael, the Bishop of Gloucester came and led our first united lent service last Sunday evening, introducing the theme of this year’s ecumenical Lent Course : Jesus and Peter – how to be a friend of god. If you haven’t joined a Lent Group can commend them to you. Lent groups are one way of having that springtime of faith experience this lent. We have also started some night prayer on Thursday evening at 9pm in the Parsonage – a time to come together in quiet and be silent before God. We live very busy and distracted lives this is an opportunity to stop and be still. I thoroughly enjoyed and appreciate last week’s night prayer I commend that to you. If you have questions about your faith or know someone who does then I commend my sessions in the Old Spot on Thursday evenings.

Bishop Michael spoke about how Peter moved from being a follower of Jesus to a friend of Jesus. The gospels give three different accounts as to how Peter first started to follow Jesus. In like chapter 4 his first contact with Jesus is when his mother in law is sick with a fever and Jesus heals her. Then after preaching on the shore of galilee Jesus tells Peter to throw his nets out for a catch. Peter gets a miraculous catch of fish and is so overcome by that experience that he decides to follow Jesus.

In Mark and Matthew’s gospel there is no suggestion that peter has experienced Jesus before his call to follow him. Jesus sees Peter fishing and says come follow me I’ll make you a fisher of men. Peter drops his nets and immediately follows him.

In john’s gospel Peter’s Brother Andrew encounters Jesus first and goes and tells his brother to come and see the Messiah. Peter goes along with his brother Andrew and Jesus sees something in peter and says you are Simon son of john but you will be called Cephas Aramaic for Rock, or Peter Greek for Rock.

Bishop Michael suggested that those three accounts of the call of Peter are models for how people come to faith today. Some have their eyes open due to some powerful experience of God at work in their lives. Like Jesus healing Peter’s mother in law, stuff happens that convinces individuals that god is at work and they have to make a response. Many of you in this church came to faith that way – you were desperate for help and god answered your cry and revealed himself to you and you have been on that journey ever since. For others it is a sudden conviction or prompting – maybe by the magnetism or another individual of faith or a God filled Christian that prompts you to change and to become part of the– I’m going to start coming to church, I am drawn into this, this is something I want to do – it is a new purpose. Like Jesus showing up at the lakeside and suggesting to \peter a new future and purpose – come follow me and I’ll make you a fisher of men – wow what an adventure – what a new direction. Finally many of us come to faith because of the Andrews of this world. The patient generous witness of family and friends. Come along to church, come along to this meeting, give it a go, but I will come with you.

You make tentative steps into the faith community. You are not sure what you believe but you belong first and grow in understanding. Eventually you realise you have changed your identity. No longer Simon but now you are Peter. When individuals get their name changed in scripture it is usually a sign that god will do something significant in their lives. It is a sign of God’s blessing and that god will be at work through them.

Names and identities can change. Soon we will be voting on whether Scotland should be independent from the United Kingdom. There may be a referendum in the next government about whether Britain stays in the European Union. The recent census information revealed that there has been a 75 % increase in the number of professing Muslims in this country. If those trends continue, within a generation the religious identity of this nation, that is the people who can be bothered to be committed and involved in religious practice, will be predominantly Islamic not Christian – our identity will change.

In this passage from genesis we get three new things – a new name for god, new names for Abram and Sarai, and a new sign of a covenant between god and humanity.

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**First of all God reveals himself to Abram with a new name – I am God Almighty. In Hebrew it is translated as El Shaddai**

At the age of 99, 24 years after the first promise was made that Abram would be the father of a great nation, God appeared to Abram again. Up until this time, Abram, knew God only as Jehovah (YWHW) and as El Elyon. (Lord most high). But now God reveals another side to his character. He says – “I am El Shaddai”.

The first part of this compound name El is the word for God and means “mighty and powerful. It is often translated as Almighty because it can also stand for a mighty mountain. The word can also have a more tender definition. The Hebrew root Shad is the word for a woman’s breast. In this context, the name of God speaks of his all-sufficiency. A New baby finds a safe and secure place at his mother’s breast. In fact at that breast, the child finds everything it needs to survive – love, warmth, nourishment. As a child, when we were afraid, we could run to our mother and find safety and protection in her arms. Just as this is the case for a new baby, we find that God is all-sufficient for us, in every circumstance that we find ourselves in.

When the two words are put together, El Shaddai means the “One mighty to nourish and satisfy.”. The ancient rabbis referred to Him as the “all-sufficient One.” The early church made sure this name was right out front in the Apostle’s Creed: “I believe in God, the Father Almighty…” When we admit our insufficiency, the Almighty is sufficient to meet all our needs. When we are empty, God is enough!

“I am El Shaddai – your all sufficiency, walk before me and be blameless.” What was the major stumbling block for Abraham walking before God and being blameless? What was the major obstacle to Abram having anything at all to do with God? I think it was the fact that 24 years earlier a promise had been made and it had not been fulfilled. What was going on – was he being taken for a ride here. Could this God YHWH be trusted? I don’t know whether these thoughts were going through Abram’s mind, but I do know that Both Abram and Sarai believed that they had well and truly missed the boat. In verse 17 we see Abram laughing in disbelief that God was still contending that he could bear a child And in 18:12 Sarah also had a bit of a giggle to herself. So it was in this context that God reveals himself as the all sufficient one. He was saying, don’t worry about what you have or haven’t yet received. I am all you need and will supply you with all you need. .

**Secondly Abram and Sarai get new names.**

“No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations.” (v. 5)   
For twenty-four years Abram had been living under the shepherding hand of God. Abram was not the same man in character that he was when God first called him. Through out the Bible, when character changes significantly, God changes the name. Now God challenged Abram to a closer walk with Him by changing his and Sarai’s names. The name Abram means “high father or father of many.” This must have proven to be an embarrassment many times over the years to Abram. Whenever he met someone new, he was forced to introduce himself, Abram the father of many. It must have happened hundred of times, each time is was more galling than the last. “Oh, you name is Abram, father of many! Congratulations! How many sons do you have?” And for years the answer was so humiliating, none. And now he was the father of one and that by a servant girl. How he must have hated the question.

“Then God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name.” Genesis 17:15 (NKJV)  
The name Sarai means “contentious.” This speaks volumes about the home life of Abram and Sarai. Solomon writes “it is better to live in a corner of the roof than in house shared with a contentious woman”(Proverbs 21:9). Having a thousand wives, Solomon no doubt knew what he was talking about. Sarai was a problem wife. Yet in the New Testament Peter says that this woman is a model for all women to follow, but only after her name is changed to Sarah, which means “princess.” She is never referred to as Sarai in the New Testament. God does not set her forth as a pattern for women until she becomes Sarah and loses her contentious spirit. As Sarah she learned to develop “ a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious” (1 Peter 3:4). She was not naturally this way but she learned by God’s grace to be such. I suspect that Sarai was argumentative, the classic nagging wife. But through the years by God’s grace she learned that she did not have to defend herself on every occasion and she became Sarah, a princess, honoured among women.

When god truly encounters someone their identity will change.

Abraham is to walk or live his life ‘before God’. The word translated as blameless makes this covenant sound very demanding. But the word used here suggests not the absence of faults but the presence of a positive quality. God wants Abraham to be wholly committed to God’s ways. God doesn’t expect him to be sinless and whiter than white. God can cope with people’s moral mistakes. Rather God is looking for a certain direction in people’s live, a certain cast to their lives – a focus, a goal, a fundamental moral wholeness.

**Thirdly there is a new sign of the covenant.**

With Abraham, God’s sign of covenant was to be circumcision. In the New Testament, the covenant sign is baptism. Neither circumcision nor baptism was the means of salvation but a sign of belonging to the faith community. Salvation in the Old Testament and in the New Testament was “by grace through faith.” A whole chapter is written in Romans (chapter 4) to show that salvation came to Abraham years before he was circumcised, so all would understand that act in itself had no saving merit.   
But it is a sign of belonging. Your name is known and is part of a much larger community who live in relationship to god, the all sufficient one.

Conclusion

Is god all sufficient to us?

Are you doubting that God is able to supply you with all you need? Things look hopeless, impossible and useless. We have exhausted all our resources and we are at our wit’s end – nothing has worked. Have you ever felt like this? God invites us to know him deeper as the all-sufficient one. I am not saying it is easy to trust that God can supply all our needs,. Maybe we need to be reminded of how God provided marvellously in the bible for his servants and read some biographies of some of the saints of old and in present times.

Titles of god may be given to us but who is God in our lived experience? What would we call God? Sarai doesn’t believe God is all sufficient and that she will have a child. She gets her maidservant Hagar to be a surrogate mother and have Abram’s child Ishmael and then gets jealous of her and the family relationships break down in strife and envy forcing Hagar out. She goes out into the wilderness where she encounters God. In verse 13 of chapter 16 we are told that Hagar named the Lord who spoke to her ‘You are El Roi’ for she said ‘have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?’

Different experiences of God may lead to different views of God. What is a name for God that "may be more congruent with our own the life experience?

God changes Abraham's name and gives him a new life. Do we feel that same sense of purpose as Abraham or a Peter – named by god?

What about having our name known in the covenant – belonging to a community of faith – just feeling that we belong.

I read an interview with Camilla Batmanghelidjh in the paper yesterday. (That’s a name to get your tongue round!). She founded the Kids Company that parents abused and neglected children who are not parented elsewhere. She believes that children recover with unrelenting love. She is deeply concerned at those who are nameless in our society – those children who are in harm’s way. She estimates that 1.5 million are being harmed, that 650,000 children are referred to child protection and only 49,000 are on the register. Politicians are more interested in attainment and not focusing on how we help those who are being chronically harmed. She is concerned at the crisis in our society where young people have nowhere to go during the day because of high unemployment in their age range. She is concerned that they will gather in perverse spaces that are not being counteracted by healthy adults. I tell you theses comments because we should be concerned for the nameless ones in our society – and we are – and we hope the youth centre based in our Parsonage will start to address some of those needs.

How can we help others to know they have a name, that they belong and that together we can build a covenantal community where we look after each other?

May god the Almighty sufficient one – El Shaddai, always be present with us, to know us by name and lead us into life.

**Elohim** – the general name for God. It speaks of his strength and his creative power Elohim spoke and the world came into being. It is a name which is a plural and thus speaks of God being three persons – the holy trinity. It is also a name which begs us to worship him. John writes in Rev 4:11 - "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."  
  
**El Elyon** – The Most High. This is a name which was revealed to King Nebudchadnezzar to show that no matter how important he thought he was or how much power he believed he possessed, there is one that his higher and mightier. God is the Most High, El Elyon who rules in the kingdoms of men.  
  
**El Roi –** The God who Sees. What a revelation to know that God is one who sees what we are going through. This was a name that was revealed to Hagar, Abram’s maidservant. You might remember that Abram and his wife Sarahi were waiting for God to fulfill a promise to them. You see God had said that Abram when he was 75 years old, that he was going to be the father of many nations. Well they had been patiently waiting for 10 years and no movement at the station. They were getting a bit sick of waiting and so they had a great idea. Why not have a child by Hagar. So that is what happened and Hagar became pregnant. But no sooner than this occurred, than Sarah regretted it and started to make life difficult for everyone. Hagar was ill treated so much that she ran away from her master and God found her beside a spring, on her way back to Egypt where she was born. God met her in a miraculous way and revealed himself as El Roi. The God who sees what we are going through. He is a God who knows and understands – what a comfort that is.  
**El Shaddai = “Almighty**”  
The second meaning people see in this work is the meaning of God being the Almighty One. People who hold to this view see the word as coming from the Hebrew root Shadad which means to be powerful. In a similar way to the meaning “All-Sufficient” one, the “almighty one” gives confidence to Abram that God is all powerful and is able to bring about even those things which we would see are impossible.   
  
This designation communications to us that God has infinite power. He created this world and everything we see in it. He has power over the wind and the waves. Think about the things he did for Moses – rolling back the Red Sea, providing food and water for a million people in a 40 year desert wandering. There can be little doubt for us that God is all powerful, but for Abraham, who had a limited knowledge of this God, this name must have held such deep significance.   
  
Up until this time, all that Abraham had was a knowledge of God Jehovah (YWHW – one who makes covenants) and as El Elyon. (Lord most high). But these just told him that God loved making promises and that he was a great God worthy of worship, there was little evidence at this point to show that God had the resources at his disposal to bring any of this to fruition.  
  
With this new Revelation, God says, even though the promises seem to be pipe dreams and impossible from a human perspective, I am almighty. Nothing is too difficult for me to accomplish, so have faith and walk before me.