**4th March 2012**

**Genesis 17.1-7**

**Mark 8:31-38**

During the Cold War there was a Russian comedian Yakov Smirnoff who made a visit to the United States. He was not prepared for the incredible variety of instant products available in American grocery stores. He says, "On my first shopping trip, I saw powdered milk--you just add water, and you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice--you just add water, and you get orange juice. And then I saw baby powder, and I thought to myself, “What a country!"

Instant babies, instant children – if only it was that easy. When your children are small and you are tiring of watching the same episode of teletubbies (or whatever it is nowadays) for the tenth time, changing more nappies, waking up in the middle of the night you long for the day when they will have grown up. People say to you it’s a wonderful age, you just want them to stay this small, but your thinking no – I want them to grow up quickly. Then when they grow up you have nostalgia for when they were small.

Change comes slowly.

The story of God’s salvation plan for humanity is slow. During Lent we are looking at the promises or covenants in the bible that God makes towards humanity

Frederick Beuchner the American Presbyterian minister said the Bible has a central plot:

‘Despite its extraordinary variety, the Bible is held together by having a single plot. It is one that can be simply stated: God creates the world; the world gets lost; God seeks to restore the world to the glory for which God created it’.

Last week we looked at the story of Noah’s Ark and the promise of the rainbow and we explored understandings of that ancient story. Today we have God’s promises to Abraham – to make him the father of all nations. God will start his salvation plan by using a family to start a people, a nation that God will particularly deal with, and reveal his ways to in order for them to be a light to the whole world and through whom he would bring Jesus to be the true light for the entire world.

It starts with a family.

The family is the natural place to give birth to faith.

I am presently doing an essay for my Master’s degree on the topic of the spirituality of children.

Justin Barrett an Oxford academic and psychologist, believes that children are born believers. They have an innate tendency to believe in God and look for purpose and meaning in the world. They ask searching questions, wonder about the meaning of life and express their own sense about what truly matters.

Listen to some of these stories:

A little boy's prayer: "Dear God, please take care of my daddy and my mommy and my sister and my brother and my doggy and me. Oh, please take care of yourself, God. If anything happens to you, we're gon na be in a big mess."

In a church Sunday school one little boy's family was blessed with triplets. Soon afterwards the little boy excitedly ran into class one morning telling everyone how his grandma, grandpa and all his cousins were coming to visit. When asked why they were coming he said with all conviction and excitement "MY BABIES ARE BEING CAPSIZED!"

One Monday morning a father was frantically attempting to get ready for work, and his progress was slowed by his 3-year-old daughter, who, like most 3 year olds, had a million questions. After shaving, he was rummaging through the drawer looking for his after shave, she had one more question: "Daddy, what do you need?" Being a little irritated by this time with all the questions, he responded, "a little peace and quiet." She left the room, only to return moments later, saying "Sorry Daddy, I couldn't find you any pieces of quiet."

Psychologists have found that while faith support from parents is important, in adolescence the faith support from peers is even stronger. The biggest predictor for youth adult religiosity was worship attendance with one’s peers.

Someone like the atheist Richard Dawkins believes that parents who teach their children faith and bring them up in a religion are guilty of mental child abuse.

‘There are opinions about the cosmos and the world that children, once grown, will presumably be in a position to evaluate for themselves. Religion is the one field in our culture about which it is absolutely accepted, without question — without even noticing how bizarre it is — that parents have a total and absolute say in what their children are going to be, how their children are going to be raised, what opinions their children are going to have about the cosmos, about life, about existence. Do you see what I mean about mental child abuse?’ R. Dawkins. -From ‘Is Science a Religion?’

His comments remind me of a story of a father who’s in church with three of his young children, including his five year old daughter. During this particular service, the minister was performing the baptism of a tiny infant. The little five year old girl was taken by this, observing that he was saying something and pouring water over the infant's head. With a quizzical look on her face, the little girl turned to her father and asked: "Daddy, why is he brainwashing that baby??"

Of course Dawkins is somewhat biased – being an atheist, and hugely prejudiced in that he thinks that all people of faith are irrational and believe in the bizarre. So people in this church who have got degrees and doctorates, you nuclear physicists, rocket scientists, doctors, teachers – you are all bizarre!

We like to think in this church we want to have open minds to search for God’s truth. Jesus said seek and you will find. This evening we will have our youth alpha course we will look at the evidence for Jesus; we will think about miracles, question the resurrection. The alpha course for adults, starting next week tries to do the same, encouraging questions, helping people find a reason for their faith. Can’t prove it conclusively – that’s why its faith – but neither is it a blind leap of faith.

Parents have to decide what influences they will expose their children too and which influence they will protect their children from. Anything less would be an abdication of a parent’s responsibility.

If Dawkins wants some science to answer his extreme claims then he should read the research of psychologists who actually suggest that being involved in a community of faith brings with it so many benefits.

prosocial involvement, academic achievement, coping with problems, being more likely to take care of health (better exercise, nutrition, dental hygiene)

Less likely to engage in risk-taking behaviours, use weapons, fight

Being involved in religion provides a context for: identity development, meaning, connectedness, community, being in nature, finding perspective, asking questions on difficult subjects, finding support, understanding boundaries, increased openness, better relationships, greater emotional responsivity to others, heightened sense of personal satisfaction, happiness, and positive identity formation.

Of course you can get toxic religion. This last week saw that dreadful case of abuse tied up with beliefs about witchcraft. But there is also good religion that is good for you.

Good religion should help you walk with God. That is one definition of spirituality – our walk with God – the search for God in response to God’s search for us.

God chose Abraham, met him, revealed himself to Abraham and said I am God Almighty, live always in my presence and be blameless.

Another translation is walk with me. How do we walk with God? Micah the prophet summed it up pithily later in the bible when he said what the Lord requires is this:"Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God". Justice, kindness, humility.

In our gospel passage Jesus says if any of you want to be my disciple you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. This is not a good marketing strategy for encouraging people to follow Jesus. Selling the church is always a challenge but talking about carrying crosses and self-denial is not going to be attractive in today’s world. Simon Peter was the one who understood church marketing. He recognized that entertainment is always in style and sacrifice is always out. Which is why he tries to change Jesus sound bite.

I went in to a primary school this week and a bunch of seven year olds asked me ‘why do people follow Jesus?’ I said most people don’t! Not really. It’s too challenging. But there is something about him – he loved everyone, including those people no one else liked. He forgave people and gave them new hope. He said amazing things and di amazing things and he triumphed over death.

Why did the disciples follow Jesus? Why didn’t Peter leave and go home?

Because Jesus practiced and pictured the character and possibility of all of us at our best. Because Jesus gathered around himself a community and gave them the gifts to be the church through pain and joy.

Because there has been no one since to match Jesus’ words and deeds.

Our day-to-day decisions are not likely to lead to martyrdom, but each

day we have to decide if we will give away our time and attention. Giving our lives away may mean turning the other cheek, standing with the people who are losing, doing good that will receive no applause, treating discarded people as children of God, shopping for someone else’s groceries, baking cakes that we won’t eat, reading stories to someone else’s children, taking flowers to someone who’s not our type, visiting someone else’s mother in the nursing home, discussing current events that don’t interest us, talking about faith when we would

rather be silent, doing good for people who will do no good to us in return, weeping when others weep, praying not for an easier life but for strength to give our lives away,

and discovering that if there’s nothing for which we would die, then we don’t have enough for which to live.

There's a great story about the artist Rodin, who one day saw a huge, carved crucifix beside a road. He immediately loved the artwork and insisted on having it for himself. He purchased the cross and arranged to have it carted back to his house. But, unfortunately, it was too big for the building. So, of all things, he knocked out the walls, raised the roof, and rebuilt his home around the cross (Best Sermons 3, Harper & Row, 1990, p. 115).

When you hear Jesus' call to radical discipleship, I hope you will decide to knock down the walls and rebuild your life around the cross. Remember, Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

The word for walk implies walking, rather than simply making a single walk from A to B. Abraham is to walk or live his life ‘before God’. God is watching and watching over – which is both an encouragement and a challenge. Both are significant. God will be watching over and protecting so ultimately no harm comes. Life maybe harsh and cruel but ultimately our lives rest in the gentle hands of God. God will be watching over Abraham’s life to see what kind of person he is. Abraham is no saint and gets up to some really bad stuff. The covenant God makes with Abraham doesn’t depend on Abraham being a morally upright. Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less. Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more

But it does depend on Abraham trusting God. The word 5transletd as blameless makes it sounds very demanding this covenant. But the word used hear suggest 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. God’s covenant with Abraham, God’s relationship with us, depends on our integrity and desire to keep on trusting even when the going gets tough, or we stumble and fall. Like any relationship it always takes two to tango – otherwise it won’t work.

People can feel not good enough to be in the community of faith. Many years ago I was a community worker for a church in a couple of inner city council estates. There was a local resident, we’ll call her Ceri, who was a great community activist. She worked with me in setting up a housing tenants association, a lunch club for the elderly, a parent and toddler’s group and a youth club. I said why you don’t come to church on Sunday morning worship; you practically live in this building most of the week. She said ‘I’m not good enough. All these people who come to church are nice people, I’m not nice. Despite my best efforts I couldn’t get through to her. Sadly Ceri developed terminal cancer. Her husband closed the door on the community and wouldn’t let anyone see her in her last stages of the cancer. I put a card through her door with some words from Psalm 91:

He who lives in the shelter of the Most High, who lodges under the shadow of the almighty, says of the Lord ‘he is my refuge and fortress, my God in whom I trust.

She rang me up and asked me to come and visit her.

She said she had tried all sorts of things to get well, she had even had faith healers in, reiki practitioners, acupuncture, you name it. What could I offer she said? I said I believe God loves you, loves you with a love that not even death can end. Jesus came to show us that love. He said he was our Good Shepherd who will take care of his sheep. . We talked about the life of faith and trusting ourselves to God, asking Jesus to come close, by his spirit. She wanted me to pray for Jesus help. So I asked the Holy Spirit to fill her life. She went t all hot and said it felt like electricity and then felt a real peace. I went back the following day and we shared some passages in scripture. However the next day she was admitted into hospital and within a week she died. But I know that Ceri had found faith, that she knew she was loved and accepted by her heavenly Father and that she had new courage and strength in facing her final challenge. I have faith that death was not the last word for Ceri and I trust in god’s promises – as Psalm 91 continues:

He will re3cue you from the fowler’s snare and from deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his wings, you will find refuge.

For the promise to Abraham, the rest of this 17th chapter tells us that the gift of "the land" is an important part of the promise, and then spends a good amount of time on the sign of this covenant, circumcision. The promise of the land continues to be the source of great controversy today with Israelis’ and Palestinians at loggerheads. Abraham was the father of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and those three faiths have not always got on either. Families!

Circumcision is the subject of modern debate within the Jewish faith with some believing that it is a mutilation. The early church struggled about its necessity. They decided that the sign of baptism would become the new sign of belonging to the community of faith, God’s family. The sign of baptism was more inclusive, as it was open to both male and female.

Also in this passage you get Abraham and Sarah doubting and laughing at the suggestion by god that they will have children in their old age. Great ancestors in the faith don't doubt or question, right?

You can discuss all those things over coffee.

The last thing I want to mention is about names.

Names play an important role in this story, and not just for Sarah and Abraham. The different writers used different names for God throughout the Book of Genesis. In this text, God is *El Shaddai,* translated here as "God Almighty". In the chapter before this one, Hagar lost out there in the wilderness and feeling forgotten, dares to name God as "the One who sees me" (16:13). 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 and "a wondrous, limitless future of power and well-being." This future, embraces us today, as we participate in the transformation God promises: "Those barren at the beginning are fruitful at the end. Those abandoned have become cared for. Those displaced have become royal. Those alone have come to covenant"

This is a family story, and it is poignant that the families descended from Abraham have struggled for centuries with each other, like so many family stories today. Still, the story of Abraham and Sarah can inspire hope in every family, every congregation, no matter what appearances may insist to the contrary. What unseen possibilities, beneath those appearances, can God use to produce marvellous and amazing results, a multitude of blessings for the entire human family? In what ways is God acting and initiating wonderful things, including surprising and seemingly impossible ones, in your lives and the life of our church today?