**4th September 2011 – Acts 17.22-28, John 3.1-16**

A small boy sat with his mother in church, listening to a sermon entitled, ‘what is a Christian?’ the minster punctuated the talk at several key intervals by asking ‘what is a Christian?’. Each time he pounded his fist on the pulpit for emphasis. At one point the boy whispered to his mother, ‘mum, do you know what a Christian is?’ ‘Yes dear’ the mother whispered back. ‘Now try and sit still and listen’. As the minster was wrapping up the sermon again he thundered, ‘what is a Christian?’ and pounded hard on the pulpit. At that point the boy jumped up and cried ‘tell him, mum, tell him!’

A father was teaching his son what a Christian should be like. When the lesson was over, the father got a stab he never forgot. The little boy asked, ‘Dad, have I ever met one of these Christians?’

Bringing children up in the Christian faith is a great challenge in our present society.

This time of the church year the focus is on creation – we think of harvest and our interconnectedness with the world and behind all things is God who created all things and sustains all things and redeems all things. But for many in our society God is long since forgotten and faith is seen as irrational and for the weak.

Some commentators have wondered whether the riots that have taken place in our cities over the summer are a symptom of a moral malaise in Britain and a lack of belief in God. Is society lost for meaning and purpose?

Often God is brought on stage at that point as the great policemen in the sky – the celestial CCTV – beware your sins will find you out. Humanity has a deep need for justice – when wrong is committed when evil seems to triumph – we call out for justice – yet we maybe not so keen when it involves us. The predominant image of God in the bible and in the life of Jesus, whom Christians believe showed us what God is like in the flesh, as one of us, - the predominant image – is a God of love.

The heavenly father – is like a good parent someone who will accept you whatever – go on sticking by you, whatever, go on loving you – whatever. But like a good parent that love in not sentimental. A good parent will agonise over their children, usually from experience, about the mistakes they are going to make, the bad choices they will decide on, the stupid behaviour they will exhibit. They will accept their children totally, but not approve of everything they say and do because they love them and they don’t want their children to get hurt – but they know their children are free to live and make their own way.

I guess I got searching for a faith at the age of 16. It was a time for me when I was asking what I wanted to do with my life. I hoped to get a good education, get a good job, settle down, have a family, live in a nice house, drive a nice car, and have some grandkids. But then it ends. Is that life? Or is there something more? Is there a deeper, more fulfilling vision, to live for in life? That issue got me asking questions. (It’s the strap line for the Alpha Course – ‘Life is worth exploring’)

The story of Acts in the bible recounts how the first disciples moved out from Jerusa­lem to proclaim the good news of Jesus. Paul is transformed by the Spirit to carry the message of Jesus to many places in the Mediterranean world. In this reading, Paul is in the city of Athens. Athens was known for its philosophers and they want to know about Paul’s teaching and so Paul speaks of an altar with the inscription “to an unknown God” (v. 23), which he noticed as he walked through the city. It was the custom to build such altars to avoid offending any god the Athenians did not know about. Using the altar as a point of reference, Paul respectfully invites the listeners to consider two things. First, this “unknown” God can be known intimately as the One in whom we live and move and have our being. Second, God is not contained in shrines made by human hands.

We have made promises today, as parents and as congregation to do all we can to nurture this child in an environment of faith and love in Jesus Christ and a encourage a knowledge of God who created the world and everything in it. Sadly there are no clear cut strategies for that.

I’ve been reading Rob Parsons book ‘Getting your kids through church without them ending up hating God’. The first chapter is entitled ‘God has no grandchildren’. The basic theme of the chapter is that although Parents may have a strong faith and may do their best to pass it on to their children by teaching and example, they can only go so far. If their children are to have a real faith, they must grasp, receive and experience it for themselves.

He suggests there are four distinct stages of faith in a child. Experienced faith is the first exposure to Christianity children have. It tells a child what is normal as a Christian. Of course what you experience can be varied. If you see God portrayed at home and in church as someone who is quickly angered, that will often be their view of God in later life. If you know acceptance and love, your picture of God may be like that. All these experiences are formative.

Later in the book he talks about the big five that stalk our homes and churches - over busyness, cynicism, hypocrisy, judgementalism and over familiarity and how such things can throttle the faith of our children as much as the big five beasts stalk the national parks of Africa looking for prey. He suggests ways of trying to tame these beasts so that they don’t affect our children’s experiences of church and faith. But he is honest enough to include chapters about preparing children to be disappointed with others, disappointed with themselves and disappointed with God.

The next stage Parsons suggest is affiliative faith in which a child copies what he or she sees in those around them. They will join in because ‘everybody else does it’. When children are small they think mum or dad knows everything and has done everything worth doing. Our influence is great at that stage.

However the day comes when those who influence our children will be their peer group and all parents can hope is that the work they put in during pre teen years will bear some fruit because for a few years at least, parents become helpless spectators of their children’s lives.

Of course you still have some influence. There will still be the challenge of ‘I don’t want to go to church anymore’. We know the dangers of forcing them. On the other hand there is also the danger of giving up too easily and inadvertently denying our child a longer opportunity to be touched by the life of the local church and maybe even meet a friend or a mentor whom God will use to change their lives forever. Every parent needs a bit of help at this stage and its really crucial to help children find a peer group that will strengthen them in their faith and values.

One way of doing this is to make sure that he or she is in a good church youth group. Parsons says this humble organisation, which is often the butt of criticism from parents, is so important to give youth a safe space and also to find a place of belonging. It is such a vital ministry in the church - which is why we took the decisions last year to find money to employ someone to work with our youth because we have come to recognise this is such an important area for the wellbeing of the whole church family – it is so important to invest in. Please invest in our young people – pray for them, pray for Emma and the her team, support them as you are able.

The third stage of growing in faith for Parsons is the searching faith stage which involves asking questions and trying to understand things they’ve been taught. It’s a scary stage because it may appear people are doubting their faith. I’d say it’s almost impossible to develop a mature faith unless you question and try to understand. Like the man who came to Jesus and said lord I believe, help my unbelief – we are all on the journey and because we are not God we will never fully know – but it shouldn’t stop you from coming to Jesus though.

The final stage for Parson is the owned faith when a person passes through the searching stage and is now convinced that what they believe is true – they believe it for themsleves. They may still have doubts and questions but they will try and work through these – they will own their own faith. Not the faith of their parents – but their own faith. Some children come to that place when they are 12, some when they are thirty, some when they are 90.

Jesus in john’s gospel meets up with Nicodemus who is a religious teacher. He is full of rules and regulations of religion and wants to know about Jesus and what kind of religious life he is offering. And Jesus gives him a new vision. He says you must be born again of the spirit.

Get out of your mind the stereotype of a bible thumping born again Christian. The idea behind this verse is about starting a new life – seeing with new eyes, being open to the spiritual, being open to a new life lived in the knowledge of a God who so loved the world that he gave us his son so that everyone who has faith in him may not perish but have everlasting life. – Real life.

Many people are living hopeless lives. Rob Parson in this book talks about giving our kids a vision for life. There is so much gloom about regarding jobs and prospects for young people in particular. Parsons says a friend of his was asked to speak to twelve young people who were attending a compulsory education course for children who had been excluded from school. He was given thirty minutes for his talk. As soon as he walked into the room he could see that these kids had not the slightest interest in listening to what he had to say. So he put aside the notes of his talk and says, ‘I want to offer you a deal: I will ask you two questions and you must answer them. It will only take two minutes to do that and then when that’s over you can leave if you want to.’ Twelve heads nodded to approve the deal.

‘Ok’ said his friend, ‘here’s the first question: what do you most want to do with your life? Let’s start form for the end of the row’.

The twelve answers to the first question were varied. One said she’d like to be a hairdresser and another wanted to be a footballer, another wanted to travel the world, another wanted to be a film maker.

When all twelve had answered the man said ‘and now for the second question. This time I'll start at the other end of the row. What have you done this week to get you a little nearer to reaching your goal?’ Not one child had done a single thing.

Parsons friend then said, ‘we agreed a deal and you kept your part of it – you are free to go. But anyone who wants to stay can, and we’ll talk about ways that you can begin to achieve your dream’. Only two kids left. One of the ten who stayed was the one who wanted to be a film maker. Within three months of that day he had made his first film with the help of the BBC.

When Jesus met with Nicodmus he knew he needed to say something that would inspire him and challenge him and get his attention. You must be born again he said. Come and live a life in the Spirit of God. One commentator describes it as living our lives from the inside out rather than from the outside in. Instead of living a life concerned about your appearance, your achievements or your affluence, find a deeper centre. Know you are deeply loved and accepted by the god who created all things and sustains all things. With whom we live and move and have our being. Come and find real life, eternal life.

May God bless you as you continue that journey of faith, trying to find real life, and as you bring your children up to discover that for themselves.