

Sunday reflection for Sunday the 13th March

Change: Risks and Vocations

Genesis 12:1-4a

When I was in Glangwili last week,

...looking after Michael,

.....I found I had a LOT of time to kill,

.....for the week he was in hospital

I can't sleep sitting upright in a chair

(not a hospital chair anyways)

And 8pm to 8am seems like an interminable period.

I wish I could say that I used the time wisely -

...caught up on the theological articles,

..... or worthy books I have mentally earmarked to read 'when I have the time'

But in truth I simply didn't have the concentration,

....to focus on anything but fluff -

Thank God for the internet,

...and it's inexhaustible supply of banal inanity:

- what do they look like now (pictures of formerly famous people now gone to seed)
- iTunes videos of dogs 'singing' along to karaoke
- How to transform your house into a palace for less than \$25
- Etc, etc, etc.....

One of the best sites I encountered,

...was a website forum dedicated to religious jokes -

The only condition for posters

(other than don't be abusive etc)

= was that jokes should only be made at the expense of the users own denomination or religious affiliation

(Not throwing stones at others)

On the forum,

...there were sections for different types of jokes -

Knock knock,

....narrative jokes,

.....double entendres

And variations on the old;

‘how many ***** does it take to change a light bulb’,

....style jokes.

ANOTHER favourite was the old ...

How many blank does it take to change a light bulb?

**How many calvinists does it take to change a lightbulb?

... None, God has predestined when the lights will be on

**How many charismatics does it take to change a lightbulb?

... 1 to change the bulb,

..... and 9 to pray against the Spirit of Darkness

****How many TV evangelists does it take to change a lightbulb?**

...one -

but for the message of light to continue,

..... send in your donation today!

****How many Catholics does it take to change a lightbulb?**

...none,

....they always use candles

****How many pentecostals does it take to change a light bulb?**

...201 - one to change it,

.....and 200 to shout “AMEN - We have seen the light!!!”

****How Many Amish does it take to change a lightbulb?**

... what's a light bulb?

How many atheists does it take to change a light bulb? -

...one. But they are still in darkness.

This one - posted by a lady under the tag ‘Angie82’, may have been just a tad miffed off with her own denomination when she shared -

****How many Conservative Anglicans does it take to change a lightbulb?**

...3 - one to change it,

.....and 2 to storm out in protest if the person changing it is a woman!

AND FINALLY...

How many Baptists does it take to change a light bulb

PAUSE

= “Change! -

my great Grandmother's uncle's first wife donated that light bulb to the Chapel!!

Another Baptist variation answered with -

9...1 to put the new bulb in,

... and 8 to bemoan how much more they preferred the old bulb!

Change -

...my convoluted and waffley introduction,

.....has finally reached it's point,

.....Today we're looking at CHANGE.

I wish I had a POUND for every time I've heard a fellow minister MOAN,

... "they simply refuse to CHANGE".

One minister -

....not so many miles away,

On hearing about the informal services that we started a few years back

...WONDERED ALOUD,

how many Members,

..... I had bribed to get that one through!

CHANGE is hard -

....we humans OFTEN find it uncomfortable

.....and we 'Churchy' humans no less so:

I went to MOLLESTON on Sunday,

...and they had their contingent,

..... of learning disabled adults,

..... Who are driven from St Davids most weeks,

.....from their residential home

They have been going for many years now,
...and are an integral part of the Church family.

I know for a fact,
...that many of them have a sincere faith,
.....because when I have visited in the past,
.....they are very open about it in the post-service refreshment time.

I was chatting to Haulwen, the Church secretary,
.. at the start of last Sundays service,
....and she apologised for one member, James,
..... who was often quite noisy and was apparently,
..... ‘in particularly good voice this morning!’

I’ve encountered James before -

-he’s about the most severe of the group,
-sometimes he hoots, whistles and exclaims loudly
-he also comments and repeats bits he hears -

“Jesus is nice, isn’t he. Yes - God God God, good, good, good..”

...and it’s takes some getting used to hearing the “amen” you’ve said at the end of the prayer,

echoed back at you:

“Amen, amen, amen, amen....”

“There’s no need to apologise” I assured Haulwen,

...”It’s nice to have some congregational participation!”

Haulwen went on to say,

...that some ministers can't adapt to James,

.....and either don't return to Molleston,

.....or make a bit of a meal about it afterwards:

Can't they find a way of 'managing' his behaviour?

They explained that it interrupted their preferred service rhythm,

.....and put them off their flow.

AGAIN -

...I suppose this discomfort is a symptom,

..... of finding change really hard to deal with:

CHANGE IS HARD.

**BUT God loves James,

....James loves coming to Church,

.....Isn't sharing the Good news with James,

.....worth embracing a little discomfort for?

= a little CHANGE?

I know one minister,

...who gave an old chap special dispensation to bring his special brew into Church with him to sip quietly at the back of the Church during Sunday services...

He literally couldn't go an hour without having a drink,

....his hands would tremble,

.....and he would become agitated and distracted.

AA had failed -

...and he showed no signs of getting on top of his addiction.

BUT he had shown signs,

.... of wanting to get to know more about Jesus:

The minister - sensibly in my opinion,

...decided that the priority was the chap's spiritual health,

Perhaps when he got to know Jesus,

...the chap might find the strength to stop drinking?

But whether or not that was the case -

...he was willing to endure the discomfort of some parishioners' complaints about the drinker at the back,

= in order to be true to his calling,

... of preaching the good news to all who would hear.

So CHANGE is one of the themes of today's text -

.... And it's important

Faith - we are always being reminded,

...is fundamentally about RELATIONSHIP

Successful RELATIONSHIP involves change...

...and that's more than who simply gets mastery over the TV remote!

I still remember our dear late friend, AMY GRIFFITHS -

...telling me shortly after she lost BERT,

....how much he had been willing to change to WIN her hand.

AS I MENTIONED AT HIS FUNERAL -

For a man who loved a pint,

...to go teetotal for the woman in his life

.....Now that's love!

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In Genesis today,

.....ARAM and SARAI encounter GOD -

.....this is an invitation into intimate relationship.

In order to do so -

Both are INVITED to accept radical,

....discomforting, life-altering CHANGE

SARAI and ABRAM

...Have received a DAUNTING proposal...

Read vs 1-2 (up until the word 'nation')

.....Abram and Sarai were challenged NOT ONLY to accept a change in SOCIAL STATUS,

..... but also a change in SOCIETY

Leaving one's homeland,

.... must rank high as an unsettling an event,

.....that people might experience.

We've seen a lot of this on the news in recent weeks -

...agonising images of displaced people,

.....pouring across the borders,

..... into neighbouring countries.

And while the public currently has a lot of sympathy -

...this isn't usually the case towards immigrants

I think it's fair to say,

...that BY AND LARGE,

= they are not presented in the most positive of lights,

And research studies suggest,

...even less so in the wake of BREXIT DEBATES

But this isn't a BREXIT referendum peculiarity -

IMMIGRANTS have always featured among the World's least liked,

...and least trusted citizens -

Do you remember that Syropoenician woman,

...JESUS met in Matthew 15?

She asked him to heal her daughter,

...but the disciples kept urging JESUS 'to send her away'

Syropoenicians were a travelling,

...displaced, immigrant community -

HISTORY tells us that the JEWS looked down on the ROMAN world,

....the ROMAN world looked down on the JEWS,

But EVERYBODY looked down on the Psyropoenician's -

....they were bottom of the pile,

.....and were often persecuted WHEREVER they managed to settle.

ABRAM and SARAI are under no illusions -

...they are waving goodbye to comfort and security,

.....in order to OBEY GOD.

If we were to read on through GENESIS,

..we'd read of two occasions,

When Abram settles in FOREIGN CITIES

(Egypt and Gerar) -

On both occasions he is in such FEAR FOR HIS SAFETY,

...that he persuades SARAI to pretend to be his SISTER.

It effectively meant -

in that MALE-DOMINANT culture,

...that powerful local MEN are free to take her as a wife

(she can't refuse)

It's hard not to feel a mite judgemental to old ABE,

GENTS -

imagine suggesting to THE LADY IN YOUR LIFE,

.....that you have a cunning plan to protect your skin,

.....in the new town you are moving to?

So yes - HE WAS UNFAITHFUL

(he should have trusted GOD),

...and he wasn't terribly considerate,

But the OLD TESTAMENT scholar - Cameron Howard,

....who wrote one of the commentaries I referred to while preparing this talk,

...argues that perhaps we should be a little slower to judge.

He writes

..that the situation we read is remarkably contemporary,

There are desperate migrant families in PARTS OF THE WORLD today,

...who sell out beloved FAMILY MEMBERS,

....to stave off starvation, persecution, torture or even death.

He asks -

- Should we judge TOO HARSHLY from our positions of COMFORT?
- Have we ever tried to take matters into our own hands -

Selfishly perhaps,

....when feeling desperate?

(rather than trusting GOD completely)

SO - like us,

...ABRAM and SARAI are God's children

They are walking his path - IMPERFECTLY, yes -

= But at least they ARE WALKING it.

So that's the 1st point this morning -

= CHALLENGE and CHANGE

Q who do we relate most to?

...ABRAM and SARAI -

.....accepting CHANGE as they step into the unknown and the uncomfortable?

Or a secret disciple like Nicodemus in the Gospels,

who would only speak to Jesus under cover of night,

...in case he earned the uncomfortable disapproval,

..... of his peers

Sometimes, I confess,

...I have been more Nicodemus than Abram

Lets swap the word CHANGE -

...to another WORD

..... = VOCATION.

If we choose to genuinely commit -

.. which involves CHANGE,

....where does CHANGE lead us?

A JOB or ROLE is perhaps too narrow -

...I like a definition of VOCATION,

..... used by FREDRICK BUECHNERS:

“The place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet”

It's not merely a THING to do

...it's something that is a 'part of you' (an expression)

if it's of GOD - Buechner explains -

‘Then it will make a difference to others -

...as well as giving you a sense of fulfillment’

Selfless ----- and self-fulfilling

There was a lot of emphasis,

.... a few years back in BUGB,

.....About broadening the understanding of ministry:

We are all MINISTERS -

Ordained Church ministers may more opportunities,

..to overtly express Christian beliefs than most people

=but they are no more important ,  
...or no more appointed to serve Jesus,  
.....than somebody without the title REV.

And so people now talk more about God's  
anointing and calling -

...to be a teacher

...or a carer

...or a retailer,

...or even a pub landlord!

(Doesn't he want salt and light to be everywhere?!)

And as Christian's,

...once we accept that we are God's,

...we also accept that he has a will and CALLING for us -

= A PURPOSE.

The other reason that the word JOB or ROLE may not be as helpful as say,  
VOCATION-

....is because in our world,

..... they are both tied up with SOCIAL STATUS

.....= SOCIAL WORTH as defined by the world.

When I went for a meeting in 2015 with my bank advisor,

.... shortly after taking time out to look after Michael,

.....he asked me if my occupation was still the same.

NO -

...when asked my new occupation, I said "CARER"

I noticed on his computer screen he typed 'UNEMPLOYED'

....oh, and I wouldn't be able to access bank products until this status changed.

My social status for those BMT years was -

'Unemployed benefit claimant'

....lowest of the social low,

And yet I happen to believe,

... that I had been doing,

..... the role GOD has called me to.

Sometimes -

when GOD calls us to a TASK or VOCATION,

...we have to choose between impressing God

.....or impressing the world

That's hard -

AS WAS going from respectable, upstanding, established citizens,

.....to despised and distrusted immigrants must have been for ABRAM and SARAI.

ABE and SARAI - weren't instantly gratified,

BUT -

as promised from the outset in the GENESIS text -

.....they were ultimately blessed

And even their blessing benefited others -

....GOD BLESSED ONE FAMILY (who'll become ISRAEL)

.....in order to BLESS THE WHOLE WORLD

OUR BEING SAVED -

isn't a selfish spiritual lottery win for you and I today,

...it's to bless others (salt n light)

SO - to summarise:

1. We are challenged by GOD to REALLY commit to him
2. If we mean it then we'll be willing to have it GOD's way - that involves a level of change and discomfort
3. It'll be different for all of us, but we all have unique callings

(something to help us pass our BLESSINGS on - something that is

-A part of us - our expression)

-A task or role to perform -

....it might be as high profile and specific as the POPE,

....or as seemingly everyday as a

serial encourager and comforter to

Others,

But it will be equally EXCELLENT and VITAL in God's eyes!

FINAL POINT:

Our unique vocation - or VOCATIONS,

...will bring BLESSINGS to ourselves and others,

but they won't always make our life nice and lovely,

..... in the here and now

Perhaps they'll be like the journey of Abram and Sarah -

...up and down:-

.....happy one minute -

.....feeling afraid and frustrated the next

But there's one final blessing -

....JESUS promises it in Matthew 25,

When we've finished his tasks - BIG or SMALL

....HIGH or LOW profile,

He'll be there to take us in his arms,

WIPE THE TEARS AWAY

...and we'll hear the words:

“Well done my good and faithful servant”

I think It's worth going out of our comfort zone,

...to hear that.

AMEN