

Sunday 5th March

Genesis 12:1-4a

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

John 3:1-17

There's a regular weekly feature in our newspaper entitled "A new start after 60" in which people share their experiences of doing something different in their later years. There are some truly inspiring tales of people taking up things as diverse as farming, magic, ballet dancing, hedgelaying, nursing, skydiving, poetry writing, travelling and so much more. Tales of people who at last achieve their dreams, or maybe realise new dreams! Tales of joy and challenge, of frustration and fulfilment, of success and failure.

And such stories make me wonder why so often our hopes and dreams lay dormant for all of our lives. We just keep doing the things we have always done. We never take the plunge. The comfort zone in which we spend our lives becomes our whole world.

Today in both our Old Testament and our Gospel readings we have stories of two people who took the plunge in different ways. The Old Testament reading was featured in the Dust and Glory booklets this week; the gospel one could easily also have been used as an example of taking risks.

The story of Abraham would have been a great one for our newspaper. He's well into his 70s; he and his wife Sarah are childless and seem to be heading for a quiet retirement. But he up sticks, leaves his home in Haran and sets off into the unknown to start a new life in a new country and – wait for it – to start a family. Now there was one of the stories in the newspaper about someone becoming a mother at 62 – but that was about being reunited with a son she gave up for adoption more than 40 years before. Becoming parents for the first time at 75 or more – now that would be a challenge! But if we continue to read the story of Abraham and Sarah we read of a wonderful adventure, full of ups and downs, full of joys and blessings, hardships and challenges, high moments and deep despair. We read of a life lived to the full – in marked contrast to Abraham's earlier life. We read of a transformation from a desert wanderer to the father of the Jewish nation and one described as the friend of God.

The tale of Nicodemus in the gospel is both very different and strikingly similar. Nicodemus is a scholar, a Pharisee; he is one of the Jewish religious leaders; part of the establishment. He hears of this Jesus who is preaching and teaching and doing some amazing things in God's name. He knows his peers among the Jewish leaders are wary; they see a threat to their authority and position. But Nicodemus is intrigued – perhaps he is hearing God tapping on the door of his life. He wants to find out more. Could this Jesus be the long promised Messiah? Could this change all of his thinking about life?

So in the dead of night he goes to meet Jesus in secret. He can't let his contemporaries know that he wants to find out more – if he did, he would lose his position. As they meet in the night we read that Jesus tells him that he will have to be born again if he wants to see the Kingdom of God, if he wants to find out more. He needs to make a completely new start. That all the things he holds dear; all his learning; all his power; all his authority; all his status – all these things and more he would have to leave behind if he wanted this truth that Jesus was offering. He would need to step into the unknown placing his trust in God alone.

And so Nicodemus slips back into the shadows. Maybe he feels he has too much to lose to take this step. Maybe he fears what others will say. And yet, as we continue to read through John's gospel his name keeps cropping up. Each time a little further on the journey. Each time a little closer to taking that step that will change his life. And right at the end of the gospel, after the crucifixion, we read about him anointing Jesus' body. Had he at last taken that step? We will never know for certain, but my view is that he surely did. It may have taken him three years and come after much soul searching and struggle but I think he did at last take the step into an unknown and uncertain future as a follower of Jesus. He did start out again – he was born again.

I am sure that all those correspondents in our newspaper series had doubts about what they did. How would things turn out? What if everything went disastrously wrong? What if they made complete fools of themselves? Wouldn't it be safer to stay as they were?

Any such step into the unknown, into something totally new, involves risk. Risk of failure. Risk of it all going pear shaped. Risk of losing everything.

In our Dust and Glory booklets this week, the reflection for the day as we considered Abraham's step into the unknown was this:

*Sometimes failure is actually **A Very Good Thing**. It means we have taken a chance to try something new, that we've been bold and taken risks.*

And sometimes we have to take the right risks for the right reasons, otherwise we would never move forward, learn new things or develop new relationships. Maybe we won't get it right the first time – or the first hundred times – but each time, we will be a little closer.

Abraham takes big risks in leaving his country, his people and his homeland. And he makes plenty of mistakes as well. God doesn't expect us to be perfect on the journey, he just wants us to go with him.

I don't think either Abraham or Nicodemus were actively looking for new adventures. They were probably quite comfortable where they were. Comfortable that is until God gave them a push – or called them into the unknown.

But in order to respond to God's call they had to take that risk. They could never have been sure how things would work out. Abraham could lose everything he had built up in his lifetime. He could end up homeless and penniless and still childless. Nicodemus could lose his position on the Council, his livelihood, his friends and more besides. But they both still took that step.

How do you feel about doing new things? How do you feel about uncertainty? What would you do if God called you to something new and challenging? Would you be bold enough to take the step?

I know plenty of people who have taken – perhaps small – steps into the unknown and have been richly blessed. In the context of serving God through the church people in this parish have become welcomers or duty wardens; they have become part of the team at the Tuesday Café; they have got involved in work with children and schools; they have begun to read the Bible in church or lead intercessions. Not being sure if they could do it, but being brave enough to give it a go.

Or we could look at it from a church perspective. What do we think about doing things new and different in and through the churches? Dare we take risks? Or should we always do what we have always done? There's an old adage that says if you always do what you've always done you will always get what you've always got. But even that isn't true. The world, the culture we live in changes. To carry on exactly as we did in the past in the culture of the present would not result in the full church and the thriving groups that were here 20 or 30 years ago. The world has changed and, even to stay still, we have to change. Which is why we have changed things and will continue to do so. Such change will no doubt involve getting it wrong sometimes and may need to be modified. But surely that is better than the alternative.

And this is not new to the parish. We have taken steps into the unknown in the past. In the 1980s, for example, with the reopening of St John's Church and the planting of Christ the King, St Luke's and St Mary Magdalene's Churches around the Parish in response to the needs of the growing population of the area. Brave steps taken after discerning God's call. And steps taken with varying degrees of success as we know. But taken in faith.

As we work our ways through the Dust and Glory booklets day by day and in our Lent discussion groups we will no doubt think more on these things. I am sure we are not all being called to take up skydiving or ballet dancing, but perhaps we would do well to listen out for that word from God, that prompting from him to take a step forward in faith whatever that might be for us.

I heard the other day about a Church of England School that has as a strap line the phrase **10/10 epic**. It refers to chapter 10 and verse 10 of John's gospel – I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

Jesus wants us to have life in abundance. Picture it – lives overflowing with joy, opportunity and excitement. That is the kind of message that comes through from those stories in the newspaper of people trying new things – that their lives. Have been enhanced. So if we as individuals and as church listen out for God's calling to lead us on and respond to his call that could well be the way we experience the abundance of life that Jesus promises as well!