

GENESIS 12:1-9
GOD'S NEW BEGINNING

What does the word 'mission' mean to you. If you've been involved in any large organisation in the last few years it will mean 'mission statement' perhaps, setting out the organisation's priorities for the future, the way to go about business, its culture. We come into Church and the word 'mission' means something that Church does to spread the gospel. We go about 'mission' when we knock on doors in parish visitation, or when we send out Christmas cards to everyone in the parish; that is mission. Or when we run a 'summer mission' for children for a week in the summer. Mission is something we do to tell people about Jesus, in order to convert people. That's the language with which I grew up as a young Christian and the kind of thinking that I still had until not very long ago. Mission might also just be a film starring Robert De Niro.

Next week, we are going to begin a new series of sermons on the subject of mission. I spent 2 weeks last August reading about mission and reflecting on the subject and the Kirk Session have already seen something of the fruit of that study leave. Over the next few weeks, we are going to take time to reflect in a little more detail on some of the issues of mission that my study leave raised for me and for us as church. Today, we set the scene for that series.

When I set out on my Study leave in August, on the application form I had to set out 3 aims and objectives; what did I hope to achieve with my study leave? I had a book to read; this book called *The Mission of God* by Christopher Wright; it is a big book; then I found some other things to read alongside that. I had promised Scripture Union that I would produce a discussion paper on mission as a result of my reading and a version of that paper has also been seen by the Kirk Session and will be on the Church website next week, I hope, so you can read it there. I also set out to produce a mission strategy for the congregation, how we could do mission more effectively in Juniper Green and Baberton. That never happened because of the very first thing I read.

"Mission is something God does". That needs unpicking and we will do that in next few weeks. Mission is God's, not ours. "Mission was not made for the Church; the Church was made for mission – God's Mission" (Wright p.62) I found that both startling and reassuring: startling because it is so simple and because it is something that I knew but had never really grasped before; and reassuring because all of a sudden mission is not something that depends on me or on the Church to be successful and so we have no need to worry about whether we are doing mission in the right way or not. God is at work in His mission; God is working His purposes out for world and for Church. "Mission is something God does" and sometimes in surprising ways!

Look at Abram and Sara. Genesis 12:1-9 is the story of God calling Abram and Sara to leave home and come with Him into a new place. They had already moved from Ur but had settled in place called Haran, somewhere in the area of Syria, Turkey, Iraq and yet from there God calls them again: "Leave your..." (v1) This is beginning of a plan that God is working out, a plan that will be completed only when Jesus comes into world and dies and is raised. Here is the beginning of God's mission to bless the world. God's mission is expressed in a whole lot of promises: "I will..." (12:2f) 5 or 6 times God says 'I will' and these are promises to Abram about all kinds of things: that he will become the leader of a great nation, that he will have a great name, that God will bless him richly in all kinds of ways and that others will be blessed or otherwise by their treatment of Abram. God will do this for Abram and thru' him.

These promises come after Gen 1-11. These are bleak chapters in the Bible at times; they start off well enough with God creating world in all its wonder and splendour and how very good it all is and His relationship with Adam and Eve and walking in the garden in the evening for friendship and conversation. But then that relationship is spoiled by sin and they are thrown out of garden; Cain's jealousy spoils family life even further; revenge, corruption, violence all creep into the story as human nature degenerates; then in chapter 11 the nations try to make themselves into gods with the tower of Babel in their overwhelming arrogance; arrogance rules OK! Might be the graffiti on the tower! God's good and splendid world is being slowly destroyed from the inside and His plan to bless world with all kinds of good things, especially His love and friendship, is thwarted at every turn. What will He do to change things? How will He sort out this mess?

"He sees an elderly, childless couple in the land of Babel and decides to make them the fountainhead, the launch pad of His whole mission of cosmic redemption... the call of Abram is the beginning of God's answer to the evil of human hearts, the strife of nations and the groaning brokenness of His whole creation." (Wright p.199) "Something only God could have thought of!" That's why Genesis 12 is so important, because it marks the new beginning in God's mission to bless the world. He says that He will bless Abram and Sara, and their family and descendants, but also that He will bless the nations and the world through them. All the good gifts that God has planned for the world to enjoy – the world itself and its fruit, relationships with family and friends, peace, hope, love and especially a relationship with God – all of these good gifts start here in a new way, thru Abram and Sara and are complete when Jesus comes. Only God could have thought of doing it this way!

We see same kind of surprising tactic in the gospel. As we said earlier, God's plan took a new turn through the strange shape of John the Baptist. Mark says very simply: "The beginning..." (Mk 1:1) and then proceeds to tell us the story of John who came from the desert, wearing strange clothes, with a slightly odd diet and proclaiming a message of repentance and baptising those who responded to his message. Even the Jews thought it odd; some went out just to see this strange sight and to try to make sense of it. This would not be our tactic; our tactic would be to find a famous celebrity, someone whom everyone knows and create an advertising campaign to make them heard, someone with weight or clout! God does things differently: He finds someone whom no-one knows, Abram and Sara who are elderly, childless couple, John Baptist and through them begins to work in the world. God's mission is done in God's way.

We have a part to play. Back to Abram: God says "Be a blessing!" (12:2) God has made all these promises to Abram of what God will do; Abram's job is to go and be a blessing to others. Three simple words follow: "So Abram left" (12:4) These words represent two kinds of reaction: 1)faith – he trusted God to know what God was about; he probably didn't understand all of the plan at the start or even at the end, but he trusted God and left Haran, stepping out in faith. 2)he obeyed – he did what God asked him to do; leaving Haran was an act of obedience on Abram's part; he probably could have thought of all kinds of excuses for not doing this, why it would be better for him to stay at home or go somewhere else. Abram's faith and obedience are qualities that enable him to walk with God, partners with God in the whole plan to bless the world.

Faith is a huge quality for us to have. In Church life, it is faith which recognises that God is doing things His way and that we need to seek God's will; in life it is faith that trusts God even when we don't understand what is happening in life. Faith is the key

to our relationship with God, we believe Him, we take Him at His word, we trust Him. Obedience is a much-maligned quality these days: we do things when we feel like it, when we feel up to it, or when we feel ready to do it, but we have lost some sense of living life in particular way in obedience to God. When Jesus says 'follow me' that is both an invitation and a command; it is not good advice, but a command to obey. Do it? Or not? It is a choice we have, but is choice about obedience or not. Our faith and obedience are crucial qualities because these qualities enable us to be part of God's mission in the world, essential qualities, even if not perfect qualities, for us to take our part in God's mission in our world, in our community.

"Be a blessing". What we have is not just for ourselves and for keeping; the ways in which God has blessed us are ways in which He plans to bless others too. So His grace and peace, so the gift of hope, so His love, so a living relationship with God – these gifts are for us to share with others. Christian faith is something intensely personal, but it is also something for sharing with others. There are all kinds of ways in which we can 'be a blessing' to others, but the key and most important thing to note today is that we are challenged to consider that we can 'be a blessing' to others. If an elderly, childless couple can be God's way of beginning to bless the whole world, then we, and people like us, have a part to play in God's mission to our community. To whom can we be a blessing today? Is there someone we know in Church who needs a word of encouragement? A friend, a family member, a neighbour, someone at work tomorrow, at school, to whom we can be kind, caring, comforting, encouraging? This is how God's mission in the world is done.

God didn't sort world through Abram and Sara; there was still work to be done; this work was taken to whole new level when Jesus came and is still not finished. Even after Abram and Sara, we hadn't seen the last of sin or violence in the world, the last of corruption and arrogance; we still see these today. But they could also see "footprints of divine blessing on the road." (Wright p.213) Footprints of divine blessing are still to be seen on the road, even in our world; we see them every day if we have eyes to look; we have seen some of these footprints of God's blessing in Church these last 12 months, and in our lives. We rejoice that God is at work in the world; that God is completing the mission He began generations ago through an elderly childless couple; some of these footprints of God's blessing come through us. What kind of 'me' does God want for His mission? Someone with a mustard-seed of faith, someone who longs to obey God, even falteringly! Mission is something God does, in us, through us. His plan is to bless nations, and He does it through us. To whom can we be a blessing today?