

Bennochy church: 25th February 2018

I wonder if you are fan of the *Mission Impossible* films? "*Your mission, if you should decide to accept it...*". Mission is a word we hear a lot about in the church. We talk about the mission of the church. The truth is, there is no such thing as the mission of the church. We are called to participate in the mission of God. To meet God where he is, and then to join in with what he is already doing. And that is what makes it *Mission, possible*.

This morning we are not thinking about mission, we are thinking about 'Promise'. The new series is *Promise impossible*. "*Your promise, if you should decide to accept it...*"

A promise was given to a man who was 99 years old. It just means he was very old and certainly beyond the age of being able to father children, and so was his wife, Sarah. She was about 90! The promise from God to Abraham, was all about his future generations. He would be the forerunner of a mighty nations. The writer, just to make sure we have got the point here, repeats in the this passage, that fact, I think seven times. It is a promise of nationhood, kingship and a special covenant relationship with God.

Wait a minute! Stop the bus. What is God saying here? For this promise to be fulfilled, they needed to have children. That is the bottom line. Sounds to me like an episode from, *Promise impossible*. Did they look at each other with a sense of shock

and is belief? You must be kidding! That bit is not actually recorded. Just made it up! But what would they have said to each other?

What is really interesting is this, Abraham seems to accept the promise originally given. The writer says, he bows down. It is only when God says that Sarah will also be blessed, as the mother of these great nations, that Abraham starts to laugh. God is that not possible. Are we to understand that he thought it might be possible for him at 99, still to father children! That *promise impossible* was just for him! Bring in Sarah. That is a game changer! So he says to God, can we go to plan B. Let Ishmael be my heir. Now, Ishmael was the son of Hagar, the Egyptian slave girl. The bible actually records it was Sarah's idea, for them to 'get together', since she had not been able to give Abraham any children! Interesting family dynamics going on here!

The key word here is covenant. It is defined as a contract between God and his people, in which God makes promises to them, in return for them, living as a nation in a way, as commanded by God. You do that. I will do this. The book of Deuteronomy, describes this relationship in terms of, blessings and curses. Obey God, you will be blessed and promises will be kept. But disobey God, and those same promises will be removed.

In the beginning of the Old Testament, God made covenants with three people. With Noah, Abraham, and Moses. For Noah, remember the sign was the rainbow cast in the sky after the flood, for Abraham, the sign would be the physical mark of circumcision and this would be the mark of the covenant for future generations. We are told Abraham kept his side of the agreement. God said Isaac would be born next year, and in a kind of matter of fact way, we are then told, that God simply left.

What is going on here? It is difficult for us to get our heads around this, ancient, nomadic, tribal lifestyle, that seems to accept this kind of relationship with God. You do your bit and blessings will come your way. If you don't, the covenant will be broken. One of things that makes this story different from society today, is the idea 'collective responsibility'. The contract is with the people of God, and not any specific individuals. It is made with key people, but it is for the whole nation. This is not about individual salvation. It is the binding together of God, and his people, through promises made to Noah, Abraham and Moses.

It leads us to ask the question, how do we understand these promises of God today? Do we see this clear division between the blessing and the curse, or is there another way? God symbolised his promises in different ways. There was the promise of the rainbow. There was the promise of nationhood,

and there was the promise of a land flowing with milk and honey. More of that another week.

I think we would see God's promise symbolised in the cross of Easter. There might be a rainbow to look at. A nation to be part of. A land to occupy and ultimately, there is a cross to carry. The curse of its load to bear, and the blessing of Christ, who will put his shoulder to that cross, and support the burdens we carry.

It is probably one of the great images of scripture. Jesus draws the crowd to him and says, you know the promises of God and how he has acted to save his people down through the centuries. Well, I don't offer you the comfort of the rainbow, or the power of a great nation, or even a land to call your own. What I ask is this, *promise impossible*. If you want life, you are going to have to lose it. A promise that goes against the grain of how we think. It is about letting go. It is about being a follower. It is picking up what we do not want to pick up. We would far rather leave the burden of the gospel where it lies, and walk on.

Jesus said, in the light of the colours of the rainbow, pick up my cross, and as part of the nation of God's people, come, follow me. May we walk God's land, wherever we find it, knowing that in all things, the promises of God, will be fulfilled. Amen.