

## Second Sunday of Lent – 25 February 2024

### Message – Sharing in others' concerns

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Creator, Redeemer and Giver of Life, revealed to us through creation and the Eternal Word, open our hearts and minds, ears and eyes, to you wonder and love. **Amen.**

Our first reading was the founding of the second covenant of our scriptures, the covenant with Abram who is to call himself Abraham, meaning '*father of a multitude*' and an anagram of '*multiply very much*', contained within our translation's '*make you exceedingly numerous*'.

We didn't read the full passage but Abraham's first response to God's promise is to fall to the ground and laugh. The name Isaac is a play on the word laugh, meaning God laughs or God looks with favour. Many of us have long suspected that God has a sense of humour and never more so than in our calling and vocation.

Having a good laugh at God's promises, hardly seems a promising start to the righteousness of faith seen in Abraham, that Paul so proudly proclaims in our second reading. It's perhaps a gentle reminder to all of us that sometimes the things that God calls us to do, do seem truly amazing and quite impossible but that God will bear with us while we work through that and realise that no God was not joking but rather looking upon us with favour.

Saint Peter gives an alternative reaction to what seems to be a ridiculous idea, that Christ would be killed and rise again, and gets a rather more robust response '*Get behind*

me, *Satan!*' I, personally, am going to try to remember just to laugh at what seem like God's crazy ideas!

In the covenant with Abraham, we have a theme that recurs through the Hebrew Scriptures; God's blessing of Abraham is a blessing to all the world, not just one nation, but many nations. Saint Paul does not see this covenant as having ended but rather having been opened to everyone.

If Israel was to be a blessing to all the world then surely the Body of Christ is to be a blessing to all the world too and not just to those around us but also to future generations. I often wonder how future generations will judge us; are we leaving a blessing that will pass on for many generations or a burden that will be equally deeply lamented for generations.

In the last couple of weeks, I have come across two pieces of research that reflect on how Christians engage with the world. The first one, I confess I hadn't realised existed in Aotearoa. As someone with a degree in mathematical modelling, I had a keen interest in the Christian Research Association when I was in the UK. I now learn that they are active here in New Zealand and, to my delight, that their research has broadened considerably.

Every year, they invite churches to join the Church Life survey (<https://clsnz.cra.org.nz/>). I may well be signing us up for this, perhaps not every year, but it would be great to know how we compare to other churches and to get some insights into how we think as a worshiping community.

Across all denominations, the congregational priorities are building strong community in church, spiritual growth, and worship services that nurture growth. I would suspect that

we would not be far off this as our priorities. This is for congregations as a whole and there will be a variety of priorities amongst the members of any congregation. This is quite an inward-looking set of priorities and we must ask how this really proclaims the gospel to those around us and how this offers any kind of blessing to the world.

The second piece of research is the second round of a survey that was first conducted five years ago. It is the Faith and Belief, Te Patapaatai Whakapono, survey funded by the Wilberforce Foundation (<https://faithandbeliefstudynz.org/>).

This is a survey looking at the faith and belief of the general population of Aotearoa New Zealand. The sample size is a thousand respondents which is good for overall results but less robust when broken down to subgroups.

While it is not asking exactly the same question, the top longing respondents expressed is for '*a hope for the future*'. We believe that a part of our faith is that it gives us hope. Yet, people are not looking to the church for hope.

When respondents were asked about what makes them feel hopeless, it is the state of the planet, Aotearoa New Zealand society and their own financial security. These might all be seen as practical expressions of what life in all its fullness should look like.

Comparing these two surveys gives us pause for thought. The faith and spiritual priorities of congregations have very limited overlap with the priorities of most of the population of Aotearoa New Zealand. There is spiritual need out there but we are not seen as any part of the answer.

While this is a slightly more fragile conclusion from the faith and hope survey, it also seems that younger generations are turning back towards faith, though not religion. One wonders how well we will be able to respond, yet what is needed most is simply sharing our own experience with others, which we can do!

So, this year's Lent course is picking up the first of [A Rocha Aotearoa New Zealand's Rich Living group study series](#). It is on climate change. From conversations I've had, I know there are a range of opinions on climate change among the members of our congregations. These studies are inviting us to reflect on what a Christian response might be.

My discussions with members of the congregation have made me look at the latest climate research in some detail. There is, for example, a fairly famous paper referred to simply as *the hockey stick*. The results of the original paper show that after a thousand years of stability around 1900 our climate started to warm quite spectacularly.

(<https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn11646-climate-myths-the-hockey-stick-graph-has-been-proven-wrong/>).

This original paper was criticised for a number of reasons. It contained some quite sweeping assumptions but if correct it would be quite concerning. This set a group of scientists off trying to address the issues of the original study and pushing the data back eleven thousand years.

(<https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn23247-true-face-of-climates-hockey-stick-graph-revealed/>)

The finding is, we are still within the range that was seen five to ten thousand years ago but are moving very rapidly

above it and that the rate of change is far greater than anything we have seen in that period. If there has been some kind of stabilising process in the past, it appears now to be broken. You may offer your own reasons for that but the obvious suggestion, most of the other possibilities having been eliminated, would be human influence!

The second thing that I had a look at was current climate change models. A study has been done of seventeen major models and their reliability. Mathematically, it is not that easy to test the models. We don't have future data so we have to use what we have at present, using older data to create the model and seeing how well the model predicts more recent data.

(<https://climate.nasa.gov/news/2943/study-confirms-climate-models-are-getting-future-warming-projections-right/>;  
<https://agupubs.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1029/2019GL085378> )

The models have some significant variation. But if we take their mean predictions, we track very closely to the observations we are making. Now, as our weather gets more extreme, the models may get less reliable.

Unfortunately, this is unlikely to be a move in our favour!

A further point that was made to me is that technology will enable us to fix all of this. I agree that this is possible but at what cost before we get there. Those most greatly affected are often those least able to cope. God has a priority, a priority for the poor, which we must share, for the last, the least, and the lost. I am also not convinced that the nations of the world currently have the will to cooperate on this.

Technology may be able to solve the problem but at what cost and to how many people. Is this the heritage we wish to pass on to future generations, the clearing up of all that we have consumed?

When I was a child, my dad, a geology lecturer, cheerfully pointed out that a sea level rise of 50m, a rough calculation of rise when the ice caps have melted, will mean that the bottom of the steep hill we lived on will be tidal! That is about twenty-five miles north of London. (We have in the meantime realised that the warming of the seas may cause a far greater rise in sea level as water expands as it is heated.) In a more local context, the Waikato River will enter the sea somewhere between Hamilton and Cambridge. The cathedral is perhaps well placed to last a little longer on Pukerangiora!

Much of this seems so distant. The challenge is to reflect on the heritage that we are passing on to future generations. I hope that we will be a blessing to our children and our children's children. There is uncertainty, yet, the more we learn the more certain it seems that we must act for a better tomorrow. Even if you struggle to accept climate change, there are numerous other ways in which we are destroying the environment and failing to care for God's good creation. We cannot deny it all.

May God give us wisdom and grace, courage and determination, so that we may bless our children and our children's children and their children. Amen. Amen.