

### **Talk. Testing Faith-the challenge of other religions.**

Are we nearly there yet? How much further is it now? Are you sure you know where we are going?

John and I have always been fond of rambling, not vast distances on the whole, usually somewhere between 6-10miles. So it seemed only natural that when our children were old enough and had enough stamina, that we should introduce them to the delights of walking in the countryside. The eldest two were fine. However, our youngest James, used to set out full of bounce and energy, then after a break half way, used to loose his enthusiasm.

Are we nearly there yet? How much further is it now? Are you sure you know where we are going? came the plaintive cry. It's not easy just following when you don't have the map or wouldn't know how to read it if you had. You must just trust in your leader.

At the end of Genesis chapter 11 we read how Terah set out from Ur of the Chaldees for the land of Canaan. Accompanying him were his son and daughter in law, Abram and Sarai, and Lot his grandson. However, when they reached Haran, on the River Balikh, a tributary of the Euphrates, they struck camp and settled. We are not told how long they lived here, but it was in Haran that Terah died.

Chapter 12 then records how once again Abram heard a call to continue his journey, to leave all that had become familiar and to venture out into the unknown again. It's not easy to continue a journey after a break, especially when the momentum has been lost. Perhaps stamina and confidence is running low.

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Abram was a childless old man when God summoned him to leave Haran and I can imagine he might have been reluctant to move on at first. Can you imagine Abram's incredulity and laughter when God **promised** to make him the father of nations. "Who me? You've got the wrong person I think. You need a younger person for the job".

Not only did God make a promise, He also presented Abram with a **purpose**- the well-being of Israel carried potential for the well-being of other nations.

Finally, this passage indicates that God was a very real **presence**. He would bring blessing to those who blessed Abram descendents and curse those who cursed them.

So once again Abram took up the challenge and set out in faith with his close relatives towards the land that God had promised him and his descendents.

Time and time again God chooses the unexpected person and the Holy Spirit enables them to achieve marvellous things for God's glory. Just look at Paul. Who would have thought that the zealous Pharisee would be the instrument God would choose to

spread the Gospel message to the wider Gentile audience. Paul's former friends probably despised him and saw him as a turncoat when he began to preach the Gospel message. However, he stepped out in faith and journeyed wherever God called him to go.

Paul in Romans says we are made righteous by our faith, not our deeds. This is surely true, but I ask what good is faith if not translated into a transforming power that stirs us out of our lethargy and spurs us into action-not because of what we can do, but what God can do, through us. Abram's faith in God would not have had the same recognition if he had denied God's call to action and remained in Haran. And where would the gospel message be without Paul's faith in action?

The blurb of a book is meant to entice you to purchase. The following words on the back of 'The Challenge of Islam to Christians' by David Pawson certainly made me stand and take notice, and more importantly want to find out more.

*It begins, 'Moral decline and erosion of a sense of ultimate truth have created a spiritual vacuum in the United Kingdom. David Pawson believes Islam is better equipped than the Church to move into that gap and it is far more likely to become the country's dominant religion in the future'.*

Islam is very pro-active in recruiting and converting people especially young men. It is currently the second largest religion in the world, claiming at least one fifth of the population and is increasing at four times the rate of Christianity.

In the foreword to the book, Rev. Dr Patrick Sookhdeo, who in 2003 was Director of the Institute for the study of Islam and Christianity in London, comments that Pawson is sounding a wake-up call to the Church in the U.K. He continues, *'The British Church increasingly faces not just a loss of members but also a lack of theological certainty and conviction. The ravages of secularisation have taken their toll on her and pluralism has marginalized her, creating a vacuum that Islam is now fast filling.'*

True, we are living in a multi-faith society that is suffering from secularisation, materialism and consumerism. Even Peter Owen, an Anglican priest from Sussex, set out in the TV programme 'Extreme Pilgrim' to look at the merits of other religions across the world. But this doesn't mean that our Gospel message no longer has relevance and meaning? But have Christian values been watered down so much that they are no longer recognisable in society and have no effect?

Pawson suggests that *Human nature prefers to be told exactly what to do than have the responsibility of finding out for oneself what is pleasing to the Lord by getting to know him. A faith giving specific guidance about religious observance is an advantage.* Humans like to know where the boundaries are even if some delight in keep pushing them.

And earlier this month, the Archbishop of Canterbury sparked a public debate, by saying that "the adoption of some aspects of Shari'a law is inevitable in some sections of British Society." The media had a field day.

The Christian call to faith is not an easy one. Many find its way of life difficult. Ours is a faith based on personal relationships between God and humanity that need to be a priority. It is not just about God in history, but of the present. It is about a God who influences and permeates every area of our lives, not just about living by a set of rules.

So what will be our response to today's challenges? Or is that the problem? We aren't doing anything. Is the church, of which we are all integral parts, being called to venture forth beyond the familiar and engage with the unknown and sometimes dangerous situations. If so, this needs a response of courage and faith.

The trouble is that when they learn they are saved by faith, many people start to worry. Do I have enough faith? Is my faith strong enough? Am I the right person to be doing this? In the end they probably spend so much energy analysing and questioning that someone else has to be called, or worse still, it goes undone. We declare our faith in God and Jesus Christ and then snuggle down into what is familiar, afraid to step out of our comfort zone.

As God made promises to Abram, so Jesus Christ made a **promise** that whoever believed in Him would gain eternal life. Jesus is strong enough to save us however weak our faith might be.

And Jesus also presents his disciples with a **purpose**. "in the name of the Messiah, the message about repentance and the forgiveness of sins must be preached to all nations" Luke 24:20 (GNB).

We are called to share our faith, to share our experience of God within our lives. The book of Romans emphasises the need for continuing faith to bring us safely through times of judgement.

And finally we are promised God's **presence** with us, which comes in the form of the Holy Spirit. He will walk alongside us, as guide and comforter, equipping us for the tasks ahead.

This is the challenge that lays before each of us today. We can choose to obey God's call and venture forth, in faith, on the road along which he is calling us, or we can ignore Him and deny ourselves the blessings that God has in store.

Are we nearly there yet? Are you sure you know where we are going?  
To which God replies "A little further yet. Take it one step at a time. I have the map. Take my hand and I will show you the way." Amen.