**St Andrew’s on The Terrace Sunday 7 April Lent 4**

From the Muslim Quran. Surat-Al-Anbiya (Prophets) 51-71

51. We gave Abraham his integrity formerly, and We knew him well.

52. When he said to his father and his people, “What are these statues to which you are devoted?”

53. They said, “We found our parents worshiping them.”

54. He said, “You and your parents are in evident error.”

55. They said, “Are you telling us the truth, or are you just playing?”

56. He said, “Your Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth, the One who created them, and I bear witness to that.

57. “By God, I will have a plan for your statues after you have gone away.”

58. So he reduced them into pieces, except for their biggest, that they may return to it.

59. They said, “Who did this to our gods? He is certainly one of the wrongdoers.”

60. They said, “We heard a youth mentioning them. He is called Abraham.”

61. They said, “Bring him before the eyes of the people, so that they may witness.”

62. They said, “Are you the one who did this to our gods, O Abraham?”

63. He said, “But it was this biggest of them that did it. Ask them, if they can speak.”

64. Then they turned to one another, and said, “You yourselves are the wrongdoers.”

65. But they reverted to their old ideas: “You certainly know that these do not speak.”

66. He said, “Do you worship, instead of God, what can neither benefit you in anything, nor harm you?

67. Fie on you, and on what you worship instead of God. Do you not understand?”

68. They said, “Burn him and support your gods, if you are going to act.”

69. We said, “O fire, be coolness and safety upon Abraham.”

70. They planned to harm him, but We made them the worst losers.

71. And We delivered him, and Lot, to the land that We blessed for all people.

## **Secular reading**

This is a quote from “21 Lessons for the 21st Century" by Yuval Noah Harari. It is attributed to the Emperor Ashoka.

Ashoka ruled an empire in India teeming with myriad religions, sects and gurus. He gave himself the official titles of ‘Beloved of the Gods’ and ‘He who regards everyone with affection’. Sometime around 250 bc, he issued an imperial edict of tolerance which proclaimed that: “Beloved-of-the-Gods, the king who regards everyone with affection, honours both ascetics and the householders of all religions … and values that there should be growth in the essentials of all religions. Growth in essentials can be done in different ways, but all of them have as their root restraint in speech, that is, not praising one’s own religion, or condemning the religion of others without good cause … Whoever praises his own religion, due to excessive devotion, and condemns others with the thought ‘Let me glorify my own religion’, only harms his own religion. Therefore contact between religions is good. One should listen to and respect the doctrines professed by others. Beloved-of-the-Gods, the king who regards everyone with affection, desires that all should be well learned in the good doctrines of other religions.”

## Reflection by Rev Norman Wilkins “Serious repentance by the Children of Abraham”

The theme for this service was born two or three months ago when I was reading 21 lessons for the 21st century by Yuval Harari. He said “from an ethical perspective, monotheism was arguably one of the worst ideas in human history.” Seeing as how Christianity is based soundly on the foundation of monotheism, that there is one God and not a whole lot of gods, I  had to give that challenge some thought. So I started with Abraham as the Bible makes it pretty clear he was definitely wedded to the idea that there was just one God. We all have some ideas about what Abraham did from the Bible stories we know.

He was promised a son Isaac who would have as many descendants as there are stars in the sky when he and Sarah were far too long old to have kids. Then was the almost sacrifice of Isaac. We may know about Hagar and Ishmael and Sarah’s jealousy of Hagar. We probably know about Sodom and Gomorrah and Abraham bargaining with God’s angels for them not to destroy the cities, but the cities were destroyed and Lot’s wife turned around to look when they were escaping and was turned into a pillar of salt. There is a lot more detail including Abram and Sarai’s name change, Abraham being blessed by the priest Melchizedek and some comings and goings between Canaan and Egypt but Abraham’s real achievement isn’t mentioned specifically in our Bible, for that we have to turn to the Quran.

The Bible has lots of detail about Abraham but not when he was a youth, and really it misses the point concerning Abraham’s real influence. As a young man, Abraham introduced the idea there was only one God, monotheism.

Before Judaism, Christianity and Islam got established, the common religious scene was for a pantheon of gods to be believed in and worshipped. We can all think in general terms of the Greek gods, Zeus and his lot; the Roman ones like Mithras that was a serious rival to early Christianity, the Thor and Woden of the Nordic regions, the Baals that gave Elijah a bit of trouble, the Hindu gods like Shiva and many others. With the exception of the Buddhists who don’t believe in any god at all, a plethora of gods used to be believed in by pretty well all humanity. Now thanks to what Abraham started, monotheism is accepted by a majority of the world’s people. We don’t know if Abraham and the rest of the characters in the story actually existed and it doesn’t matter whether they did or not but the story has been hugely influential. Because he introduced monotheism, I think it is reasonable to claim that Abraham has been the most influential character in all human history and Dr Harari would say he had not been a good influence.

That passage from the Quran was a bit hard to understand, in its ponderous English version, it wasn’t really fair to land Lyn with it, but it really should be one of the foundational stories of our faith. I will put it in my words so this is the story:

God or God’s angels say that Abraham was a good man and Abraham said his elders and people were wrong to have been devoted to idols. They did not take him seriously but Abraham told them he bore witness to the God of heaven and earth. He warned them he had ideas about what he would do to their statues and when they went away he cut them up - except for one. The people thought that the youth Abraham had destroyed their idols so got him and questioned him. Abraham got his own back for the people not taking him seriously and said that it was the one remaining idol, the biggest one that destroyed the rest, and told the people to question this idol. The people argue amongst themselves and then said to Abraham that surely he knew idols didn’t speak. Abraham had outsmarted them by then pointing out that they were worshipping powerless things rather than the true God. So the people were not exactly open-minded and tried to burn Abraham, but God kept the fire cool and Abraham and Lot went off to the promised land.

It's a shame we don’t have that story in our Bible and therefore we don’t know it.

Now I want to make this relevant to what is happening in the Church at this time of year. This is Lent. Lent is the time when we take stock of ourselves, prepare for the events of Easter by self-denial and examining ourselves and repenting. To put it pretty traditionally, it is a spiritual clearing out of the mess of life in preparation to receive our salvation from Jesus achieved through his death and resurrection of Easter.

So that awful word “repentance”. As I expect you know I am not one to place too much significance on our tendency for personal failings. As I have said before I don’t dismiss the 10 Commandments, breaking them causes a fair bit of human misery but it is nothing compared to the misery caused by the communal failings of culture like nationalism, racism and prejudice.

So today I am going to mention a couple of really troubling nasties that are a consequence of mindless monotheism. Actually there is nothing wrong with monotheism as such but it has been a really convenient tool to advance human greed and lust for power as well as a bit of sadism and arrogance.

I deliberately chose the Gospel reading I did about Jesus saying there were two great commandments because combined with the second commandment about loving our neighbour as ourselves monotheism is fine, but otherwise it can lead to some of the worst failings of humanity and there I have to agree with that wise man Harari.

The first failing is that dispensing with belief in gods associated with things like rivers, trees, animals, the sun and the moon has meant that we have tended to regard them as inferior inanimate objects that exist for our use and convenience. If we don’t have reverence for the trees for example we just get stuck in with our chainsaws with not a thought for the living thing that is the tree, no respect for its dignity, no asking for forgiveness from a god of the forest for despoiling it and depriving other living things of their use of it so we just use it for our desires.

We monotheists have tended mindlessly to accept that other parts of this world don’t have some spiritual reality attached to them without recognising that can lead to treating these things as just commodities for our use.

I use the term “partner species” for other living things and if we regard our neighbour as not being limited to human beings but include all our partner species, then loving our neighbour would stop us abusing the world around us for our own benefit. (That is why I used that famous picture of the Earth from space as the illustration on the order of service. That is our neighbour)

When I first thought of this I felt good that the Whanganui River has been given the status of a person, and that is good even though it does seem a bit silly to me. But why the Whanganui River and not the Clutha or the Hutt or one of its tributaries that was polluted more than most, the Waiwhetu Stream. The reason surely is that the Whanganui is uniquely valuable to we humans; it is very much valued by the local people and their traditions. I guess that’s better than nothing but where is recognition of its intrinsic value. When we say cleaning up our waterways is important, why is it? Is it just because we want to swim in them without getting tummy bugs or is it because they are naturally clean, that other living things depend on them being clean and that is simply how they should be?

If we happened to believe there was a god of the Waiwhetu stream who had to be treated with respect it would have remained clean and pristine. There is, if you identify “god” with the intrinsic value of the stream.

So that is one result of unthinkingly adopting monotheism. It is a sin that needs to be recognised by all religious people. It is relevant to identify this in the Lent season.

There is a second undesirable result of our monotheism, and that is intolerance, closed-mindedness and pride which again breaks the command to love our neighbour as ourselves.

Since I put this service together and wrote this address the atrocity happened in Christchurch. We don’t know what was in the mind of that murderer in Christchurch, but he must have been convinced he was right and Muslims were wrong and that overcame any command to love his neighbour.

There would be some congregations that would have got prickly about having the Quran read in church as Holy Scripture. Though of course pride and seeking power comes into it, thinking only we really know God and understand what He wants, and our scriptures are the only true ones has contributed to the Crusades, some of the religious persecution, division of the protestant churches in particular over issues of doctrine. All of that comes down to the dark side of “There is only One God” The dark side is to add “these are His only scriptures, and there is only one way to understand them – our way”. If you have a different name for God, if you understand him differently then you are wrong and you need to be won to the truth, our truth. If there were lots of different gods, then this particular sin would have been far more difficult to fall into.

It would be impossible to fall into it if we love our neighbour as ourselves and hence seek to understand them and respect them in their different beliefs. The reading about that Indian emperor Ashoka and his open encouragement of people to value their own religious beliefs but also the different beliefs in different gods held by others is one that would be hard to accept in a narrow monotheist church.

So in conclusion my Lent message is simply to be aware that the positive foundation for our faith, there is one God, does come with really serious pitfalls if we don’t recognise them and live by the second great commandment to love our neighbour and so do our best to avoid those pitfalls which is repentance “Lent style”. Also Jesus didn’t say “Two warm fuzzy, nice to haves are to love God and love our neighbour” They are commandments. Full Stop!