

Trinity 11 (2013)

Hebrews 11

New International Version (NIV)

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. ² This is what the ancients were commended for.

³ By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

⁷ By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith.

⁸ By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. ⁹ By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹ And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. ¹² And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

¹³ All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. ¹⁴ People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

this week – there's link between the epistle & gospel readings

it's so powerful and so obvious

It doesn't take a genius to see - that it's all about faith

But what is faith all about? Who or what do we have to have faith in? And what do we already have and already know that will help us to keep our faith strong? And one other important question to ask this morning, what does God want us to do with our faith?

Because whilst our two readings this morning have one common theme, they demonstrate two very different answers to that question; First we have the writer to the Hebrews urging his readers to show the same faith as their ancestors - stepping out – in Abraham's case quite literally on a journey into the unknown. It's about taking risks. A woman twice child-bearing age trying for a baby. An equally old man building a boat big enough to take two of every species of animal, despite the laughter and ridicule of neighbours, no matter how ridiculous, how incredible, how dangerous, they all believed this was coming from God and must be taken seriously. It's about putting faith into action, putting our money where our mouth is. As Bishop Peter reminded us in our Lent Course It's one thing to talk the talk, but the real test of faith comes when we're asked to step out – and walk the walk.

Now of course, we're not all expected to leave our homes and set off for an unknown destination. We're not all called to be missionaries in some far-off land or go to war or earthquake zones to help refugees. It may be something as simple as a couple of hours a week in a charity shop,

CHAT or Somewhere to Go. It may be even simpler than that - just bringing our children up in the faith, teaching them good manners, to open doors and give up their seats and let others go first because that's the way Jesus taught us.

So that's the lesson in Hebrews - put your faith into action. In our gospel reading however we have Jesus urging His listeners to demonstrate their faith in a different way. Here it's about endurance and determination. The faith Jesus urges is more about staying vigilant, hanging in there, not beating our breasts when our children remember their manners but forget why!

Above all, Jesus is urging us to constantly uphold our faith by keeping His commandments by not letting our standards slip, by not allowing ourselves to be worn down by the ignorant, the intolerant, the greedy and the selfish. But this still doesn't answer those questions at the top of this sermon; what is faith? Who or what is our faith in? And what keeps us in the faith?

What is faith? If you look in most dictionaries, they'll more or less tell you the same thing; Faith is believing in something that cannot be seen or proven. I once had a long - sometimes quite bitter argument by email with a dyed-in-the-wool atheist who just could not accept anything that was told to him unless it was scientifically or intellectually proven. He had great faith in scientists, so I argued that through the ages scientists constantly have to move the goalposts because new discoveries have blown their last theories and formulae out of the water. In the end I told him I had neither the time nor the energy to argue any further. He thought I was admitting defeat But I was simply following The Lord's instructions - to knock the dust from my sandals, and move on. Some people it seems, will never believe, at least not from us. But then of course we don't know what The Lord's going to do with them once we've sown the seed and left.

Lesson one this morning - don't let their lack of faith take away or diminish yours. As I said to our school leavers recently - if them-out-there can't or won't believe, that's their problem, don't let them make it yours. So faith is believing in something that can't be proved, and as I said to that on-line atheist, if I could prove beyond all doubt - then it wouldn't be faith - it would just be another piece of intellectual data, to be filed away somewhere in the little grey cells and forgotten (well it would in my little grey cells!)

So we come to the second question - In who or what do we place our faith? I often ask families when I'm arranging a funeral, if their loved one had a faith. Very often they'll say something like "Well, he believed there's *something* out there". And as I didn't ask if they believed in aliens I redress the question to something like, "Did he believe there's more to life than this?" "Oh well, we all believe we go to heaven, but we don't go to church or anything like that".

You'll be amazed how many people believe in heaven but stall at the idea of God's personal appearance. Something I find incredible - why would you believe you're going to heaven when you die, if you're not prepared to believe in the One Who came from there? Why do so many people believe the message but not in the messenger? Why would you believe in the kingdom but not the King? Now, I'm about to go into territory that I don't often go, but might I be so bold as to say that for many of "them-out-there" it's not so much about belief - than *hope*. Obviously there's nothing wrong with hope - it's something we all desperately need in this world today, hope is good - *belief* is so much better! I can hardly say to a grieving family "I *hope* your loved one has gone to heaven" Any more than I could tell them the real truth, that if he or she failed to believe in Jesus the Christ

they most certainly won't be going there! And when they say "yes but you don't have to go to church to believe", I want to say "oooooo yes, but you so really do!"

If you don't go to church you may have a glimmer of *hope* - but you won't have a *belief*

This is the crux of my sermon this morning, in this day and age of radical change, changes in technology, in politics and in social trends, our biblical foundations come under increasing pressure. Gay marriage, abortions on demand, assisted euthanasia, the list goes on

In his first presidential address, Archbishop Justin told Synod

"we live in a time of many revolutions in this country. We are custodians of the gospel that transforms individuals, nations and societies. We are called by God to respond radically and imaginatively to new contexts – contexts that are set up by revolutions"

Now don't get me wrong – there's no tactical shift about to emerge. I'm not about to send you all out there bashing your bibles, I still believe the best way to introduce Jesus to the people, is to *be* Jesus to the people. But we have to make darn sure we *believe* in Him first! What worries me is that there are too many people – *even in the church*, who just *hope*, rather than believe (and if you are one of those people PLEASE come and see me after the service!!!)

Which brings me to the last of those questions I asked earlier

"what must we do to keep us in the faith?"

I don't think there's any doubt that when Jesus talked about being ready for the master's return from the wedding banquet His audience was probably thinking in terms of months or weeks. A Jewish wedding could go on for days, so maybe some of His listeners were expecting an even earlier return! His *disciples* had most certainly by now accepted Him as the Son of God, The Christ, The Messiah, and I dare say a lot of His listeners had similar ideas. Surely the remainder would have this man down as a prophet at the very least. And the prophets had foretold that the end of the world and the day of judgment would follow almost immediately after the Messiah had appeared. So they were thinking weeks or months, and there's nothing - they say - that focuses the mind more on Godly things than an imminent Armageddon!

But what about us? 2000 years later – and still the master hasn't returned. Some people say that we live – right now – in the end times. That all the wars and rumours of war...

Handbags between Obama & Putin, North & South Korea, The Arab Spring, it could all kick off any time now! Take a word of advice from your vicar, Keep Calm and Carry on! There's been wars and rumours of war, earthquakes, hurricanes - you name it - for thousands of years, and we're still here folks! May I draw your attention to v34 - in the midst of all these warnings Jesus slips in a little gem of a line, which explains it all,

"where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"

A lot of people think Jesus was warning that His kingdom would begin on the day of His return. But there are equally as many who believe (yes – there's that word) that that Kingdom is already here "your kingdom come, on earth, as it is in heaven"? I for one believe (yes – there's that word again) That the more we live according to His word the more we keep within His will and commandments, the more He blesses us, and the more we love Him. And so the treasure is - being within His Kingdom. For what is a Kingdom, if not a place where all the King's subjects

live within His rule and within His love? What must we do to keep us in the faith? Come to church – regularly, join a home group, learn more and more about the King and His kingdom, which isn't pie in the sky when you die but steak on the plate while you wait!

Jesus said “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom”
The Kingdom is here - you'd better *believe* it!

Amen