

Year C Pentecost 9, Proper 19

What is faith? Is faith the same as belief? What does lived-out faith look like? These are big questions that don't have easy answers.

To put it very crudely and simplistically, beliefs generally live in our head, but faith lives in our heart. Every week we say out loud as core beliefs as Christians about such matters as the Virgin birth, the crucifixion, the resurrection and the ascension. There is nothing wrong with those claims. They are our doctrines if you like, the things that we hold in our head, but Christianity at its root is not about doctrines, is not about having our theological ducks in a row. It is about our relationship with God, and God's relationship with us.

Jesus didn't ever tell his disciples that the way to the kingdom of heaven was by giving intellectual assent to any particular doctrine or idea. Rather, it was 'believe in me', and believing in the sense Jesus was using it has, I think, a different meaning. What Jesus was saying, as a number of translations put it, put your trust in me, put your trust in God.

And that is what faith is about, putting our trust in God, even when things seem bleak, and we can't see the way ahead. As Paul puts it so well in Ephesians Chapter 2. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. And what is faith. According to the writer of the Hebrews, it is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

And we see that theme of by faith and through faith running through our Genesis and Hebrew readings. Although it wasn't included in today's reading, the same chapter in Hebrews tells us that Abraham by faith set off for a strange land even though he didn't know where he was going. Yes, he heard God, and he responded by faith.

And in our Genesis reading, Abraham believed, or trusted, God's promise that he and Sarah would have their own child even though they were both to put it bluntly, well past it. And God credited that belief in him, that trust in him, that faith in him, as righteousness. And God does the same for us too.

In Hebrews Chapter 11, which Mark read part of this morning, the word faith appears more than two dozen times. And whoever wrote Hebrews got what faith is all about spot on in the first verse. Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

The precise phrase by faith occurs 22 times, commending the giants of the Old Testament, starting with Abel, then Noah, then Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, Moses, the Israelites, and the prostitute Rahab. And that's leaving aside Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and the prophets, who the writer apparently didn't have time to write about except to say that it was through faith that they conquered kingdoms, administered justice, shut the mouths of lions and so on.

So, what was the writer to the Hebrews on about? Well, in the chapter before the writer refers to the great persecution his Christian audience had been suffering great persecution and he was urging them to hang on to their faith, even by their fingertips, because God's promises were true.

Be like the heroes of the past and live by faith, he says, because it's better than the alternative. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. By hanging on, their faith in God, their trust in God, will be richly rewarded. That call to live by faith is like a rhythmical drumbeat, a steady heartbeat on an ECG

And the writer makes another really important point that is as relevant now as it was then. Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob were

all living by faith when they died, admitting they were foreigners and strangers on earth, because they spent their time looking for a better country, a heavenly one. Rather than looking back at what they'd left they were looking forward to something better.

That is also true for us as Christians – we are not to spend our time looking back at our pre-Christian past, we are to look with hope and by faith for something better. And isn't that what immigrants do, of whatever religion or none? They travel by faith expecting to find something better. They don't forget their past, but they don't yearn for it.

It isn't always easy, because they find themselves living in that liminal space between different identities and different cultures, but nevertheless living in trust, living by faith. Abraham, at God's insistence, looks at the night sky, trying to imagine having as many descendants as stars in the sky at the same time as knowing that Sarah was childless and past child-bearing age. And yet he trusted.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus speaks of faithful servants waiting through the long hours of the night hoping that their beloved Master will return. All three readings describe the lives of the faithful, they set out for new places, they are nomads, they work to transform the world, even though they are yearning for another world altogether.

These readings tell us what faith is, at least as it is described in Scripture. It's not a destination or some kind of closure. It's a longing, it's a desire, a hunger even. It's about stepping out just because God has asked us to. Not because we know exactly where we're going. It's about seeing new life even when we're feeling exhausted, or all withered inside. Faith is the urgency of the homeless for a new and lasting home.

It's also about being ready for action, having our lamps lit on a dark night, about waiting on a promise that hasn't yet been fulfilled. It's about a real desire to welcome and serve Jesus, wherever and whenever he appears.

So, the opposite of faith isn't doubt, it's more complacency and apathy, it's a willingness to accept anything less than the kingdom that God wants to give us.

Yes, and not only does God want us to give us the kingdom, it's also his good pleasure to do so. And we know that because Jesus tells us precisely that at the start of our Gospel reading. People focus on his command to sell our possessions and give alms, and to make sure we know where our true treasure lies – both very important as are the exhortations to be ready and dressed for action.

That promise that it is God's good pleasure to give us the kingdom – and it is a promise – is all the encouragement we need to live by faith when the going gets tough, because it reassures us that what God has in mind for us is better than anything we can imagine. In Jesus God shows us a future in which Jesus is the first fruits, the first to show us what a resurrection life looks like.

It's a promise that binds the receiver and the giver closer together, it's a promise that creates hope, that creates relationship that creates faith.

It's a promise that we don't need to be afraid, just as Abraham didn't need to be afraid. Do not be afraid is a constant theme that permeates the Bible – and for a good reason, it is generally the harbinger of good news. Think of Mary and the Annunciation, or the shepherds in the fields.

As we read these verses, we can imagine ourselves as the heirs of those who have gone before us, but it's not necessarily so easy to see ourselves as the ancestors of those who will follow us, especially at a time when the Christianity and the Church seem on the defensive and in retreat in the Western world. But that's not true in the rest of the world, where Christianity is thriving.

Maybe that's the difference between the haves and the have nots, that when we can satisfy ourselves materially then don't need to worry about our souls. But that doesn't explain the increasing interest in spiritual matters among many people in the West – except that we have done a lousy job in telling people how and why God makes such a difference to our lives.

Perhaps the answer is that when our descendants look back, they can see that we too, just like the heroes of the past, lived by faith. Do not be afraid, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.