

**Living by faith – what does it mean?
Hebrews 11.1-16**

11.08.2019

By faith... by faith... by faith... These words pulse through today's epistle like a heartbeat, be-bum, be bum, be bum).

“By faith our ancestors received...by faith we understand... by faith Abraham obeyed... by faith he stayed... by faith he received.” If we add in the verses our lectionary reading skips today, we would hear even more. The writer goes on ‘and what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and the prophets; those who were stoned, put to death, persecuted and mistreated.’ They were all commended for their faith, and yet the writer says none of them received what had been promised in their life-times. God had planned something better for us and for them and that of course is in the person of Jesus Christ. .

by faith . . . by faith . . . like the rhythm within us that keeps us alive.

We don't know who wrote the Letter to the Hebrews. But what we can tell from reading the whole letter and hearing its concerns is that it's written to people who are giving up, who are leaving the church, who are leaving the faith. It's written to people who have made sacrifices for their faith, who have even endured suffering, but now, these people are growing weary. It was hard enough in the short term—they can't see staying in it for the long haul. They can only see what's immediately in front of them, and they don't like it. They think they can get a better deal somewhere else. So, Hebrews is the sermon of a preacher to people who are heading out the door.

This is the preacher's message: Don't give up. Have faith. Trust. Jesus Christ is the one in whom we can hope. Jesus Christ is the one in whom we can trust. Jesus Christ is the one in whom we can place our faith because Jesus Christ is faithful. You have not seen the future, but Jesus holds the future. Have faith in Jesus because Jesus is the faithful one.

This is why the writer's *by faith... by faith... by faith...* is like the rhythm of a heartbeat.

We live in a time where the world seems to have lost its bearings. What is truth after all in this era of social media fake news, where powerful political leaders seem to have lost a moral compass worthy of our

human destiny and purpose? And where the Church seems to have lost confidence in our ability to trace the works of God and boldly relay to the world what God has said. **WE** seem to have lost our bearings. We are no longer so confident in the doctrinal certainties that an earlier generation inhabited so much more confidently.

It is in this confusion, in our uncertainty, the dark night of the soul that St John of the Cross speaks of and which haunts us all from time to time that faith grows in its true meaning. Faith appears quite simply in the form of 'dependable relationship'. *You may not understand, or have the words on the tip of your tongue, but you learn somehow to be confident in a presence, an 'other' who does not change or go away. You realize that when the signposts and land marks have been taken away there is a presence that will not let you go [Rowan Williams].* And that is faith in a deeply biblical sense. Let me say that againdo these words catch you not only in your head but somehow also in your heart? *You may not understand, or have the words on the tip of your tongue, but you learn somehow to be confident in a presence, an 'other' who does not change or go away. You realize that when the signposts and land marks have been taken away there is a presence that will not let you go.*

Look at the disciples in the Gospels, and the number of times they fail to get the point and Jesus says, 'Don't even you understand?' Look at how they ask the silly questions, the times they try to turn away, when they clearly don't know what is going on. But in the great words of Peter in John 6.68, they also say 'To whom else can we go?' They know that the presence that has called them is dependable and that while they may be insecure, volatile and easily capable of betrayal, forgetting and running away, what they confront in the person they call Rabbi and Master is the one who will not go away.

Faith as dependable relationship is something other than faith as a system of propositions, a kind of 'tick this box faith, or faith in my own ability to master truth; it's much more a confidence that I can be mastered by the living truth of which I am only scratching the surface. I can be held even when I don't feel I can hold on. If my relation with the living truth is initiated and sustained by God's faithfulness not mine, it is dependable. But recognising that requires me to step back from my own resources- trust and have faith.

And then we of course in response to this dependable relationship from God, we need to be as best we can dependable people – people in dependable relationship, who are there for those who feel abandoned

and those who don't know who and where they are. By our faithfulness to the lost, the suffering and the marginal we begin to show what it is to have faith in the one who does not let go. One of the biggest challenges to the Church today is how we embody that kind of dependability in this society and in a world which seems to be stepping deeper and deeper into tragedy. And that's why your emerging vision for the future of St Luke's is so exciting.

I want to speak personally. Recently I have been reflecting a great deal on what 'have faith' looks like for me. And I have been made aware again and in a new and refreshing way to the persistent admonitions that are in our biblical texts and in our liturgies. How often I repeat them without ingesting them, without matching the words to the experience of God they call me to. Thank God we have times of silence here in our worship,

I have been a priest for 46 years and still I am a beginner and come fresh to such words, seeking to be eager to let them absorb my very being, that I can truly know in a way beyond mere head knowing, and have faith and trust in the dependable relationship which is the ground of all our being.

Here are one or two of the statements in scripture and liturgy which nourish me. As I read Isaiah [43.5] God looks at me and tells me 'You are precious and honoured in my sight, and I love you.' God says that to you too. God says that every single human being that has ever and will ever live. And as I am commanded by Jesus 'to love one another as I have loved you,' what does this statement in Isaiah mean for me.

Daily now I look at not only those who are closest to me but also to passers-by in the street. It's easy on my e-bike! I wonder about them – what's going on in your life, I wonder. What gives you joy, what are your dreams and hopes, fears and anxieties. And I say to them as I pass by 'you are precious and honoured in God's sight and God loves you'. And I am called to love you too. What then does that look like? How might it be if each of us turned to one another and said 'You are precious and honoured in my sight, and I love you'? And so on to the stranger in our midst, in our community, those of other faiths, any one we might meet?

In Wednesday Morning Prayer the sentence is 'rejoice always, pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus.' How do I embody that, living in the presence of God? In my darkest times I call this to mind and heart and have faith so that it may be so. And I choose to 'lift up my heart'. There's another

encourager we say so often in our worship. And I ask myself, 'well do I, do I lift up my heart? And my response is – yes I will and I do.

We say 'this is the day that the Lord has made, we shall rejoice and be glad in it' Well will we? What does that look like? On Thursday at the Mass I started the service by saying this and Margaret caught my eye as we said 'we shall rejoice and be glad in it'. And we smiled and it was so. My heart was lifted, and in that moment I rejoiced and was glad.

'The Lord is here' we say. God's spirit is with us. Wow, before we rush on, pause, savour the moment. It is so. And so on through the great thanksgiving of our Eucharistic prayer. Soon we will say these words. Let us also breathe them in as the breath of God and allow them to enliven us. They celebrate the dependable relationship of faith and hope and love which are the heart of our discipleship, of our learning and growing in Christ.

I and with the words that Moses spoke to the Hebrews after he had given them God's commandments and promises. 'These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. ⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ⁸ Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates'