

Sermon, 09 July 2023, Church of Scotland Geneva

Text 1: Hebrews 11: 1-16 (taken from Good News Version):

¹ To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see. ² It was by their faith that people of ancient times won God's approval.

³ It is by faith that we understand that the universe was created by God's word, so that what can be seen was made out of what cannot be seen.

⁴ It was faith that made Abel offer to God a better sacrifice than Cain's. Through his faith he won God's approval as a righteous man, because God himself approved of his gifts. By means of his faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.

⁵ It was faith that kept Enoch from dying. Instead, he was taken up to God, and nobody could find him, because God had taken him up. The scripture says that before Enoch was taken up, he had pleased God. ⁶ No one can please God without faith, for whoever comes to God must have faith that God exists and rewards those who seek him.

⁷ It was faith that made Noah hear God's warnings about things in the future that he could not see. He obeyed God and built a boat in which he and his family were saved. As a result, the world was condemned, and Noah received from God the righteousness that comes by faith.

⁸ It was faith that made Abraham obey when God called him to go out to a country which God had promised to give him. He left his own country without knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he lived as a foreigner in the country that God had promised him. He lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who received the same promise from God. ¹⁰ For Abraham was waiting for the city which God has designed and built, the city with permanent foundations.

¹¹ It was faith that made Abraham able to become a father, even though he was too old and Sarah herself could not have children. He[a] trusted God to keep his promise. ¹² Though Abraham was practically dead, from this one man came as many descendants as there are stars in the sky, as many as the numberless grains of sand on the seashore.

¹³ It was in faith that all these persons died. They did not receive the things God had promised, but from a long way off they saw them and welcomed them, and admitted openly that they were foreigners and refugees on earth. ¹⁴ Those who say such things make it clear that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵ They did not keep thinking about the country they had left; if they had, they would have had the chance to return. ¹⁶

Instead, it was a better country they longed for, the heavenly country. And so God is not ashamed for them to call him their God, because he has prepared a city for them.

Does your faith ever feel artificial ? Do you feel as though you know what it means in theory, even that you're quite confident to believe that theory ? God created us. God loves us. But we are spoiled by being wrong and sinful. So God sent His Son to die for us, to take our punishment, to open up the way to make us who we should be as God's children. It's all true and we know it. But what does it mean in practice ? More to the point, how can we experience it ?

I ask this because not knowing something is one of the main threats to our faith. Or again, as I just mentioned, not experiencing it as we experience the things we know, can be a real problem. It's one which Christians have tried to deal with for centuries.

To take one example, what is the point of art ? That may itself sound like a heresy to those with more sophisticated tastes and culture than I can admit to having, but the question I would like to consider is more to do with why do we react to it so differently. Much of the medieval artwork we see in the stained glass windows of Churches was not, and is not, just for decoration. It was an attempt to show or perhaps even to describe what the Christian experience looked like. Not that it worked for everyone. To some, these are works of inspiring beauty. To others they may be completely artificial and the idea of spending eternity sitting on a cloud and playing a harp is not even very appealing. Even the great works such as the Sistine Chapel can bring out quite different reactions. As for modern art, in most cases, the jury is still very much out.

However, it's not the appearance of the paintings or displays which is what really matters. It's the attempt by someone to make their faith concrete, to show what it means in way which we can see or hear. It's also interesting that it may very much speak to one person while leaving the next quite unmoved. If art can, however imperfectly, be a vision of faith, then we need to remember that the experience of faith is not the same thing from one person to the next.

So how do we feel faith ? Not just how do we know it as a theory, as per readings, teachings, Prayers or hymns, valuable though all of those are, but as something which we experience for ourselves ?

The fact is that maybe we don't. At least, not to the full. That is what makes faith both exciting and frustrating. It gives us a vision of what we can look forward to but it also asks us to take it on trust.

In the passage from Hebrews which we read, the writer is sending a strong encouragement to a group of Jewish Christians who are in danger of losing their faith. The writer may or may not have been Paul himself but either way, it's written by someone originally of the Jewish faith, who has nonetheless himself become a strong believer in Christ.

Faced with increasing persecution of Christians by the Roman authorities, probably in the AD 60s, those receiving the letter were becoming half-hearted and doubtful of whether their new faith meant a great deal, or whether they might as well retreat back into the safety net of their previous beliefs. With the persecutions and threats very real experiences, the more distant idea of the love of God offered in Jesus was perhaps becoming a bit too unreal.

The writer addresses this from the beginning in verse 1: “To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see.” He goes on to point out in verse 3 that all we know is not something we can really understand, at least not as far as how it exists: “It is by faith that we understand that the universe was created by God's word, so that what can be seen was made out of what cannot be seen.”

He then lists several examples from Jewish scripture itself. Abel was a righteous person because he acted on faith simply because he trusted God's word. Enoch pleased God and was saved from death, even if that was not his original goal. Noah built the Ark without any real idea of the flood to come apart from what God had said to him. Abraham left a life of comfort to become a refugee because God promised him a new country.

The result of their faith was that they moved forwards, and this is the real encouragement which the writer provides. As he says in verses 15 and 16: “They did not keep thinking about the country they had left; if they had, they would have had the chance to return. Instead, it was a better country they longed for, the heavenly country. And so God is not ashamed for them to call him their God, because he has prepared a city for them.”

They did not experience that heavenly country, at least not in their own lifetimes. Noah may have seen the flood eventually but his actions, like those of the others cited (and the writer goes on to name many more), were a result of his faith, not his experience.

That itself is a key message – your faith is not something you have seen, not something you have experienced as you would experience

something with your senses, not even an experience of love or friendship. But it is real and what makes it real is you.

There is a great encouragement here. You don't need a cast-iron belief to have faith. You don't need to be sure of where you're going to have faith. You can even – and this may sound shocking to some – not be sure if you believe in God (in the traditional sense) to have faith. The fact that you want to do something, the fact that you want to believe, the fact that you want to find that heavenly country the writer of Hebrews talks about: these are the things which mean that despite any other doubts, you have faith.

You don't have to prove it. In fact, we know that based on today's science you could not do so with 100% certainty. You don't have to know what it looks like. Do stained glass windows look like nice colours but not much else to you ? Are you unsure of quite what life eternal might consist of ? No problem. In fact, when we think about it, the Bible itself provides virtually no description of what to expect after we move on from this life. Apart from a few passages in the Book of Revelation, which may well be metaphors anyway, nobody even tries to describe the everlasting life which God promises. But they don't need to. Like the heroes of the Bible, that's not our concern. Our concern is to move ahead right here, right now, believing that we are going on the way where God has led us.

In Mark 9, a father brought his son to Jesus for healing. The child was possessed by an evil spirit, which may also have been a case of severe epilepsy. The father asked Jesus, "Have pity on us and help us, if you possibly can." Jesus' response was, "Yes, if you yourself can. Everything is possible for the person who has faith." To this, the father responded,

“I do have faith, but not enough. Help me have more !” At once, Jesus healed the child.

“I do have faith, but not enough. Help me have more !” He maybe didn’t realise it at the time but even that little faith was enough to move forward. The man wanted to grow his faith. Even though it was weak, it was strong enough to let him believe in what he could not actually see right there and then.

There’s a line in the film, “Dogma”, where two fallen angels discuss the difference between themselves and humanity. One comments on the life given them by God as opposed to humans, “Ours was designed to be a life of servitude and worship...He gave them more than He ever gave us – He gave them a choice. They choose to acknowledge God, or choose to ignore Him.”

That is the beauty of faith. It’s not about knowing, about perceiving something concrete and defined. It is a conscious decision not just to believe but to do something because we believe it. It doesn’t matter if we feel as though we don’t have enough, as if we don’t know where we’re going, as if we might even be wrong. The fact that it’s there at all is enough to demonstrate that we’re on the right path. The way to find what’s at the end of that path is to follow it, confident that God really is beside us, and that He will be there at the end to receive us.