

Lent 1 – Faith

Reflection by Rev Mike Newbon

Welcome to the first of 6 reflections that make up our Lent Course for 2021. Over the next few weeks we will be considering the question of faith.

... What is it!?

... How can we depend on it!??

... How do we Live it!???

... What Models of Faith do we find in Scripture!??

... and *perhaps* most importantly - within our present circumstances, how do we make sure we have a faith that helps us to stand up to suffering and uncertainty, especially modelled by Jesus himself!

Everybody has some type of faith, people have faith in so many different things, when we get into our car we have faith that it will start and get us to our destination. We have faith that our doctor knows what he or she is doing! Everybody has this mindset of faith of some kind or another. No one can live a single day without exercising some sort of faith in something. And in reality, our faith is only as good as the object in which we place our faith.

When we were talking about our Lent course as a team, somebody mentioned the great French acrobat and tightrope walker ...**Charles Blondin**. He used to walk a tightrope across places like the NIAGARA FALLS, 160 feet above the swirling cauldron below, sometimes cooking himself a meal whilst balanced on a wire halfway between America and Canada... On July 15 1859, Blondin walked *backwards*, yes backwards, across the tightrope and then returned pushing a wheelbarrow. The story goes that after pushing a wheelbarrow across back and forth, whilst *blindfolded*, the crowds watched in amazement, as you would. But now Blondin asked for some audience participation. He asked the audience, "**Do you believe I can carry a person across in this wheelbarrow?**" Of course, the crowd shouted that yes, they believed! So, he asked for a volunteer to get into the wheelbarrow to take a ride across the Falls with him!

Blondin then asked the question - "**So who will get in the wheelbarrow?**" Of course...no one did!?! The story of Charles Blondin paints a real life picture of what faith actually is. The crowd had watched his daring feats. They had empirical evidence that he could do the job. They said they believed, but their actions proved they truly didn't. You see, I sometimes think that we only have the deepest faith in things we think, at best, we can control; have power over! Or, at worst, things we can create for ourselves! It's one thing for us to say we have faith in God. But it's another thing totally to put our faith and trust in His Son, Jesus Christ, completely.

I had a quick look at a dictionary definition of this word 'faith'. The first definition was '**a strong and unshakeable belief in something, especially without proof or evidence**'. Secondly, **a specific system of religious beliefs, i.e, the Jewish Faith**. Thirdly, **Christianity, A trust in God and His actions and promises**. There were other definitions looking at 'faith' from a less 'religious' perspective. So, faith in things, or people, or ideologies that are around us. And maybe that is part of the problem for us. Faith can be such a broad concept, in such differing circumstances, that our 'faith' in God, Father, Son and Spirit, is watered down, or modified by these other definitions. And anyway, there is a bit of a dilemma for us, for example within this current pandemic, do we have faith in God, or have faith in the people of science who have worked so hard to bring us a usable and working vaccine! How do we reconcile those two seeming extremes of faith at work! I personally have no problem in recommending the vaccine to everyone, as I believe the development of these various vaccines is an answer to my/our prayers. God, the creator of all there is, is quite capable of inspiring a scientific/medical solution in and through the men and women working in laboratories around the world. So I don't personally see a dilemma that needs to be reconciled here, my faith sees God at work in his world here!?! But what about you, are you as comfortable with that?

Sadly, it's all too easy to be just fine weather Christians, happy to claim faith when life is easy and settled and well, but when life is far from easy and settled, our faith falters. So many times I have heard lovely members of churches, saying things like, **'I can't believe in a God anymore who would allow my Mum to get ill, I prayed for her to be better, but God ignored me!'**, or things like, **'I can't believe in a God who would allow my marriage to fail, my business to go under, for me to be made redundant.'** etc etc etc. People find they walk away from any expression of faith when the going gets tough! The question I ask you is, are you truly willing to trust our God in all his facets, not just to keep us safe whilst pushing us across a tightrope in a wheelbarrow, but to see us through the really serious challenges of life, and, more importantly, into eternal Salvation itself!

Of all the people you might expect to be faith-filled in the truest sense, it would be the Israelites, those first people of God. But all too easily they 'invent' what seems an easier focus for faith! Think back to the Exodus. They are whinging to Moses about being dragged off into the wilderness, when they thought back to having food on the table, even when they were enslaved. In those wilderness years, God gives them food (Manna and Quail from heaven) and water, and, more importantly was present with them in the pillar of cloud, talking directly to Moses again and again and again. Giving them directions and encouragements. The power of God was with them in battles against the Amalekites. He gave Moses various directives for Godly living, including the 10 commandments. God gives them all sorts of practical directives to enable these people to safely live in peace with Him and with each other with a sense of justice! Well worth reading through the first half of Exodus to see these instructions unfolding again. But one thing God is adamant about, and this is where God is a jealous God when it comes to where His people focus their faith, He instructs Moses to tell the Israelites, (Exodus 20: v 22 onwards)

22 Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Tell the Israelites this: "You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven: 23 do not make any gods

to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold.

24 “Make an altar of earth for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, your sheep and goats and your cattle. Wherever I cause my name to be honoured, I will come to you and bless you.

You would have thought their experience of God’s presence, and provision, and that promise of blessing, would have built their faith, but when Moses is doing business with God on Mount Sinai, what happens?

Look at Exodus Chapter 32.... **‘The people saw that Moses took a long time to come down from the mountain. So they gathered around Aaron. They said to him, “Come. Make us a god that will lead us. This fellow Moses brought us up out of Egypt. But we don’t know what has happened to him.”**

2 Aaron answered them, “Take the gold earrings off your wives, your sons and your daughters. Bring the earrings to me.” 3 So all the people took off their earrings. They brought them to Aaron. 4 He took what they gave him and made it into a metal statue of a god. It looked like a calf. Aaron shaped it with a tool. Then the people said, “Israel, here is your god who brought you up out of Egypt.”

5 When Aaron saw what they were doing, he built an altar in front of the calf. He said, “Tomorrow will be a feast day to honour the Lord.” 6 So the next day the people got up early. They sacrificed burnt offerings and brought friendship offerings. They sat down to eat and drink. Then they got up to dance wildly in front of their god.

How quickly their faith is distracted by their own thinking, their own interpretation of a god. And there are people today that think that as long as they are sincere about what they believe, then that faith will be good enough. But people can be sincerely wrong! Paul says in 2 Tim 1:12... **‘I know who I have believed in’**. Faith is not the object of some self-concocted idea, but, as

Paul knew, faith, true faith, is in Jesus Christ. If your beliefs are not founded on the right person it doesn't matter what else you believe.

Hebrews chapter 11 tells us what real faith is. And some of the definitions in the history of Christian theology have followed the biblical formulation here so listen carefully...

And I'm reading from verse 1: **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.**

Faith is the positive response to God's will and Word. People possess faith when they take God at His Word. We don't need to see something to believe it. Just think about gravity or the atmosphere! We can't see it, but we know it's there! In a Christian sense, faith is the acceptance of something, simply because God has said it. True faith is simple obedience to, and believing God's Word, in spite of circumstances or consequences.

When Hudson Taylor, a missionary, first went to China in the 1850s, he was on a sailing vessel, and their vessel had come very close to the shore of cannibal islands because the ship was caught in a calm, and it was slowly drifting toward the shore ...and the natives were eagerly anticipating a feast. The captain came to Mr. Taylor and asked him to pray for God's help. **'I will,'** said Taylor, **'provided you set your sails to catch the breeze.'** The Captain declined to make himself a laughing stock by unfurling the sails in a dead calm. But Taylor said, **'Well, I will not undertake to pray for the vessel unless you will prepare the sails.'** And so, that is what the Captain organised. While he was still praying, there was a knock at the door of his stateroom. **"Who's there?"** Taylor asked, and the captain replied, **'Are you still praying for wind?'** **'Yes.'** said Hudson. **'Well, you better stop praying',** said the captain, **'we have more wind than we can manage.'** Hudson Taylor had faith in what was unseen, and that faith was rewarded! His inward conviction enabled

Hudson Taylor to believe in things that he could not see, and that is the conviction that only faith can bring.

In conversations over the years, these sorts of awesome events have been questioned by people who say, ‘**well**’, in this example, ‘**Hudson Taylor and others, prayed for what they ‘hoped’ might happen, but that ‘faith’ had very little to do with the outcome**’, that we merely celebrate the effect of coincidence! But I cannot accept *that* in the slightest, and maybe it’s my own faith that allows me to see God’s hand in the answer to his prayers, as much as I can see God’s provision in a vaccine! Hudson Taylor ‘hoped’ that his ‘faith’ would result in the answers to his prayer that ship received. And one cannot have hope *without* faith.

When people have hope they have faith, because they hold a belief that says “**I believe that God is in control, and at work, and listens to the prayers of His servants.**” And while they have no grounds to “prove” that hope-filled assumption, they have faith in it. And whilst faith without hope is possible, hope without faith is not. True faith isn’t just a notion that some people hold onto in tough times; true faith is what helps to get us through, illuminating the pathway in times of darkness, helping to give us strength in times of weakness. Without faith, we are nothing.

A famous Baptist evangelist once told the story of an elderly lady who was very upset by all of her real troubles in life. Out of frustration, her family told her, “**Grandma, we’ve done all we can do for you. You’ll just have to trust God for the rest.**” A look of despair spread over her face as she replied, “**Oh, dear, has it come to that?**” As the people of God, we must understand that it always comes to that. To *start* with God, in faith, is so much better than only turning to him, when we’ve explored and exhausted all the other options!

But faith is not the way *around* life’s problems and challenges, but is the way *through* those issues.

The Apostle Paul writes... **12 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.**

16 However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

19 So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good. (1 Peter 4: 12-19)

Faith in Christianity is often discussed in terms of believing God's promises, trusting in his faithfulness, and relying on God's character and faithfulness to act. Faith is generally understood to be closely associated with ideas of belief, trust, and reliance. And not just in a what, but more in a who, in the person of Jesus! And so, a saving faith is understood in terms of a belief of, trust in, and reliance on the person of Jesus and his work of atonement accomplished through his death on the cross. Hence, having authentic 'faith in Jesus' leads to changes in how one thinks and lives.

I'd like to end today with a quote from a book called **The Ragamuffin Gospel**, which is well worth a read. It quotes Romans 1 verse 17... where we read, **'For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'**

Luther had been pondering this verse when it is understood the Reformation began, like a light suddenly being switched on. So quoting the book, **'Like many Christians today, Luther wrestled with the core question: how could the gospel of Christ be truly called 'Good News', if God is a righteous judge rewarding the good and punishing the evil?'**

But as Jaroslav Pelikan notes, ‘Luther suddenly broke through to the insight that the ‘righteousness of God’ that Paul spoke of in this passage was not the righteousness by which God is righteous in himself (that would be a passive righteousness,) but the righteousness by which, for the sake of Christ, God made sinners righteous (that is, active righteousness) through the forgiveness of sins in justification. When he discovered that, Luther said it was as though the very gates of Paradise had been opened for him.

This is an example of what another theologian called the ‘**furious love of God**’. Again, from the book, ‘**He (God) is not moody or capricious; he knows no seasons of change. He has a single relentless stance toward us; He loves us!**’ And faith as we will see over the next few weeks is built on that very wonderful truth!

Next Week - Theresa will be helping us to consider that Love of God, and you might like to look at John 15, and Psalm 8 in readiness for that!!

But let me close now with a prayer...

Holy God,
our lives, and the reality of our faith,
are laid open before you:
rescue us from the chaos of sin
and through the death of your Son,
and a true faith in Him,
bring us healing and make us whole
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

All Amen.