

As we approach the final Sunday of the year and bring the year to a close, we are consciously mindful, another year has passed. We tell each other, in a well rehearsed chorus of words, *"how quickly the year has passed"*, and as we grow older we say, *"the years seem to pass by quicker than before"*.

The year-end draws us into a time of nostalgia, while reflecting back on the past 12 months: have I done and said things I am proud of, or sorry for? Am I pleased and satisfied with things I have said and done which has benefitted others and myself? We may or may not voice these thoughts and emotions, but they are at work in our subconscious. The elephant in the room is the question, *what does the future hold?* A question which evokes an element of fear and dread, more than it does joyful hope!

The world seems to be hurtling faster towards a greater doom; between drastic climate change and terrorism, we don't want to speculate whether our end will come through starvation, drowning, or God forbid, some other terrible, violent calamity.

How then, do we live our lives when most of the news from the world around us is all about death, violence, deception and lies?

One school of thought encourages people to live **in** the moment and **for** the moment, and offers us a choice of trilogies - choose from hedonistic lifestyles of *eat, drink and be merry or, wine, women and song or, sex, drugs and rock 'n roll*. You could also choose from trilogies which take us above the human condition and like *philosophy, psychiatry and religion* or, enrol in a university to study *politics, philosophy and economics (PPE)*.

As people who have just celebrated the birth of Christ, for whom the person of Christ has more significance than an exclamation or a swear word, we could stretch the trilogy offering to, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit*, or if you wish to be more graphic, *Cradle, Cross and Tomb*, but we would only

be trying to cleverly package a lifestyle or school of thought, which like all the other trilogies, neither satisfies nor reassures, because they mislead.

One of the questions at a time like this, converges around the question of ***faith***: **Can faith help me overcome any apprehension I have about the future?**

Earlier this year we examined **faith** and noted, we can only ever have faith in a person, not in words or objects or circumstances. Faith is the silent language of trust between two people, expressed in a relationship when one person trust the other person, to do what they promised.

Between humans, this is easier said than done. But God invites us to place our faith in Him because He makes a **covenant** with us. He says, *place your faith in me because I can and I will deliver (I have the all the resources at my command **and** I have the desire and intention) to fulfil any commitment I make!*

As I started preparing for this service shortly after our Deacon's retreat in September, I wondered if we might pose a slightly different question about faith. Instead of asking ourselves, "**Do I have faith?**", we might be better off asking ourselves, "**Why don't I have faith?**"

The Holy Spirit directed me to two passages of scripture. I find it helpful to take the view, The Bible, which is the definitive Word of God, is a recorded diary kept by people who encountered God on their journey of life, and chose to travel with Him.

The first is in the book of Exodus. After 430 years in Egypt, of which almost 400 was as slaves, God delivers with a mighty hand, the Hebrew people from the clutches of the Pharaoh. The description is as vivid as it is gripping. A nation of around 3 - 5 million people leave Egypt and flee the pursuing Egyptian army, led by a pillar of cloud during the day, and a pillar of fire during the night to show them the way so that they could travel day and night. They reach the shores of the Red Sea, look back and

see the Pharaoh's mighty army, the equivalent of American military might today. They panic and curse Moses, *Did you bring us here to die? We were better off in Egypt!* In a matter of few days they had forgotten the life of misery they had!

Then Moses said to the people, *"Fear not; stand still, be firm, and resolute in your confidence, and see the salvation of the Lord which He will work for you today (watch God save you). For the Egyptians you have seen today, you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace and remain at rest."* Moses was conveying his confidence in God's action, **BEFORE** God acted!

God's message to the Hebrew nation that day was not, *Do you have faith?* His question to them was *Why? Why don't you have faith? After all you have seen me do for you, not just my words, but all my actions, to rescue you, save you, protect you, and bring you out, **WHY don't you have faith?***

Fast forward several thousand years. Three Gospel writers tell us of the incident when Jesus calms the storm on the Sea of Galilee.

God has come to be with His people in the person of His son Jesus. He is travelling with them, challenging the errors of their thoughts and correcting the mistakes in their way of life. One day, while crossing the lake of Galilee in a boat with His disciples, exhausted from the demands being made on Him, Jesus fell asleep. As is typical on the Lake of Galilee, a wind storm came down and whipped the waves high enough to start swamping the boat with water. The disciples panic, and why shouldn't they? After all, they **are** in the company of the Son of God and take it for granted nothing adverse would happen to them. But they panic and rush to wake up Jesus shouting above the noise of the wind and the waves, *Master! Master! Wake up! Don't you care we are perishing? Get up and save us!*¹

¹ Mark 4:35-41, Luke 8:22-25 and Matthew 8:23-27

Jesus gets up and does three things: he rebukes the wind, speaks words of peace to calm the sea, and turns to the disciples, **Why? Why don't you have faith? You have panicked! Why don't you have faith?**

Two thousand years later, we are no different. As Christians, we presume certain rights, one of which is that God is always on my side; therefore nothing adverse will happen to me. But we do live in a broken world, and the first thing we say when something unfortunate, or dangerous or hostile happens to us is, *If there is a God, why doesn't he do something! We tell Him, "Can't you see I am suffering? Do something and save me! I don't care about anyone else, do something and save me."*

And when things do not happen the way we want it, or we do not get the answers we want, the way we want it, we are happy to say, *If God cared, this would not happen. It's because He is asleep, He did not save me! I have to wake Him up, every time, and sometimes its too late; the damage is done.*

We have learned the right principle, that prayer is conversation with God. We converse with God as long it is a pleasant conversation, which might start with, *y'alright God? OK?* By the time God begins to respond, we are moving on, thinking we have heard God say, *Yeah! OK!* We have not waited long enough to hear God say, *... and what about you? How are you? What are you struggling with? How can I help you? Hear my plans for you. They are better than your plans for yourself!*

We Christians are the first to blame God for disaster, expressing our belief, it is the hand of God which brings judgement or discipline or whatever to people when disaster strikes.

I grew up thinking that answer to prayer was the evidence of faith: I prayed, God answered and therefore I have faith.

The essence of faith which we have waited to learn is, our relationship with God starts by placing our faith in Him. Faith is not the result of

answered prayer; God answers prayer **because** of our faith in Him, God answers prayer **because** we trust Him implicitly.

When we practice this principle, to first place our trust in God, God gives us wisdom and discernment to act on His behalf. Many of our prayers would be answered satisfactorily if we started by placing our faith God, and He gives us wisdom and discernment to act on His behalf.

When Jesus was woken up by 12 men shouting at the top of their voices, *Save us!*, His first response was to rebuke the storm, because He had God's wisdom and discernment to realise there was a power in the storm which was not of God.

The power of the storm weakens when rebuked by God! Jesus then speaks word of calm to settle the restless waves which were responding under the control of the power behind the storm.

We have to correct the error in our badly conditioned thinking. If we start out believing that disaster, calamity, catastrophe, accident and failure is from God, we lose the ability to discern what is actually from God, from the power which is not, because we put the devil's work often, into the category of God's work, and we deaden our capacity to recognise what is from God.

Let me tell you from personal experience, which three others will confirm. During our house group meeting on 8th December, we received a phone call about a critical situation involving a young couple. We discussed it briefly and decided not to continue with our study in the Bible, but to start praying fervently and with confidence, for this situation to be resolved. Four of us prayed, pleading with God to resolve the situation, and we thanked God for His love for all people, and prayed for His mercy towards this young couple, thanking Him for answering our prayer. In this situation, the four of us were the only ones praying! The next morning we

received a phone call saying the couple were saved from what seemed an impossible situation and impending disaster for them.

The four of us praying are not perfect people; we are not holier than any other; we are not in any way better than anyone else. All we did was to place our faith in God, that He would hear and answer our prayer and thank Him for His answer, **in advance!**

As we close out one year and stand at the threshold of a new year, it would be wonderful for each one of us to take this challenge in 2016, each in our own time and in our way: to start by placing our total faith in God, making ourselves vulnerable to His ways and His plans. I won't promise you it will be easy, nor will I promise you what happens next will be easy. But I can promise you, God who has made a covenant with you, to protect you, look after you, take care of you, and through His Son Jesus the Christ, welcome you back into His kingdom, will deliver on His promise and commitment.

If we did this as a church, we would have the discernment to know what is right for us and what is not; we would know when and to whom, to speak words of calm and reassurance.

You will know you are moving on in your relationship with God, when the question then will no longer be, ***Why don't you have faith?***

The question you be faced with, will be, ***Now that you have placed your faith in me, will you let me speak and act through you?***

AMEN