

At morning prayer the other day we had a classic bit of Old Testament. Nahum chapter 1 verse 2.

*² The Lord is a jealous and avenging God;
the Lord takes vengeance and is filled with wrath.
The Lord takes vengeance on his foes
and vents his wrath against his enemies.*

If you wanted a single verse to sum up how God can be portrayed in the Old Testament, that one will do nicely.

Just to explain, the prophet Nahum is speaking out against Nineveh, the capital of the brutal Assyrian empire and although they repented, thanks to Jonah, they reverted to their wicked ways and were overthrown. Nahum speaks comfort to Judah because their threatening neighbour is overthrown.

The Old Testament is not an easy read. It's challenging to understand what we are reading and what to make of it, yet without knowing the Old Testament, you cannot fully grasp the New Testament.

The 4th edition of the United Bible Societies Greek New Testament lists 343 Old Testament quotations in the New Testament, and no fewer than 2,309 references, verbal parallels or stories alluded to.

We have to wrestle with the bible, particularly the Old Testament but it is certainly worth it because of all that we can learn from it. This morning our passage from Hebrews, (NT) gives a role call of those who lived by faith during those Old Testament centuries.

Abel, who offered an acceptable sacrifice to God and was killed by his brother. I spoke about them at the Remembrance service.

I love the story of Enoch who, it tells us, walked faithfully with God and then was no more. God took him without experiencing death.

Noah is mentioned an Old Testament story we all know, building an ark to save his family from the coming flood.

And then Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and the beginning of the family of faith. In verse 13 it says, ¹³ *All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance.*

Advent invites us to consider these things and to recognise that to live by faith is to believe in God's Kingdom even though it's fulness may be a long time yet in coming.

Abraham was told he would be the father of a nation...he was never going to live long enough to see that come true.

To live by faith is to have an appreciation of God's purposes through history, to see by faith the culmination of God's kingdom from a distance and while we wait we live by faith in our actions.

Faith is expressed in every aspect of who we are. It informs how we think, how we react, how we plan.

There is knowing the faith for yourself, what it means to you.

There is speaking the faith and being able to explain what your faith is in.

There is encouraging others in their faith and in particular holding others in prayer by faith when life for them is bewildering and difficult.

It's by our actions and who we are that faith is seen most clearly.

In James chapter 2 this is written;

*faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.
18 But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."
Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my
faith by my deeds.*

The example given in that text is of someone without clothes or food. How can we have a faith and do nothing about their need?

Over to my right is the foodbank our own expression of faith seeking to assist those in need. There is also the hardship fund providing financial assistance. What kind of church would we be if we knew about the need, and decided to do nothing about it?

This is an example of our faith in action.

The New Testament story of the paralysed man is one we know quite well. Jesus is in a house, Pharisees and teachers of the law gathered around and a crowd pressing around the whole place.

Four friends bring a fifth man who is paralyzed. How do you picture the scene. Who is it has the faith?

Do the four friends have faith and are bringing their reluctant companion who is uncertain about the whole thing?

Or do all five of them have faith and the one paralyzed is egging his mates on...find a way, let's make a way, let's go through the roof.

I paid attention to the way that the roof was constructed in the recreated Nazareth Village we visited in Israel. Branches, some clay, some tiles. It certainly wasn't anything like the new roof my neighbour has on his extension.

Imagine the scene. Dust and clay and branches and rubbish dropping down on Jesus and those crowded around. The owner of the house – did he protest? Did he laugh about it? What kind of faith did he have?

Then matters take a curious twist. When Jesus saw their faith and I think that must be all five of them, he forgave the man his sins.

I'm not sure that's why they had brought him and I'm not sure that was at the forefront of their minds. What this tells us is this. There is something more important going on than the presenting problem.

When I was a curate I opted to do some training at the House of Bread, Christchurch in the Forest of Dean. It was the home base for the Word for Life Trust set up by Revd, Denis and Revd. Elizabeth Brazell. They ministered in prayer for healing, counselling and evangelism. One of things that has stuck with me was this.

They would respond to any emergency request for support and help with counselling with no charge. Often there would be some personal crisis that had occurred, and you don't need me to spell out all the difficulties people experience, but during the first session they would always explain who they were and where they were coming from – in other words their faith.

They would be as clear as possible and say something like "what you are facing is huge (or devastating or challenging – whatever) but we believe there is something more important than the crisis you are facing...and that's where you stand with Jesus Christ. We will be here for you and work with you to support and help, but you need to know that we believe how you stand with Jesus Christ is THE most important thing, even more than this issue."

I'm not sure how you feel about that, what your response might be, whether you think that was right or not...but they were open and up front with everyone who came and who knows, perhaps the story in Luke chapter 5 was their rationale.

The man is paralysed, that's why his friends brought him and made a hole in the roof. Jesus forgives his sins. Then, to prove the point that he has the authority, he also heals the man.

I think there's a learning point for us. Our faith can lead us to action and deeds. Good. We can though hide behind the deeds and not be ready to speak of faith – the "why I am doing this".

To live by faith is to allow our belief in Jesus Christ, our hope for His kingdom and His return to filter into every part of our lives. Quite often we are just getting on with every day, but Advent reminds us to hit the pause button and in the space we make to reset ourselves...recalibrate.

Not live by frantic effort and trying really really hard...but to trust in God's purpose and provision. To have faith to go with the flow of what God is doing or seeking to do in our lives.

Rev. Jon Hutchinson, 27/11/22