

Hebrews Faith

Trinity 11 – 7th August 2016

+ *In Nomine ...*

DEFINING FAITH

Faith is a difficult word to define.

But the letter to the Hebrews gives us a working definition:

'Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen'.

Faith is the main theme of the letter to the Hebrews – which probably isn't a letter at all. In fact, we don't really know what it is! Some have called it a sermon, others an oration or an essay.

If you open an old Bible it will describe it as a letter of St Paul – but open a modern one Paul has been deleted. It almost certainly isn't by Paul.

In language it has none of his style,

in ideas, none of his theology.

So we don't know what Hebrews is.

Or who wrote it,

Surely we know who it is written to?

Wrong again.

It IS written to Hebrews, to Jews, but where?

Were they in Jerusalem? Rome? Alexandria? Again, all have been suggested, but nothing is certain.

Except for one thing.

Hebrews is a remarkable and unique text, and through the prism of its central theme of faith it outlines a theology of Jesus Christ as our great High Priest and his relation to the first covenant, what we call the Old Testament. This is the faith by which 'our ancestors received approval' and first came to know God.

What it says is that Jesus Christ, the new covenant with all people, cannot be understood without the context of the first covenant with God's chosen people the Jews.

It is one reason why I believe we need to restore a reading from the Old Testament to our worship. As Christians, we cannot understand what we are reading in Hebrews, or indeed any of the New Testament, unless we have heard the story of what went before, of how 'the world were prepared by the word of God' as Hebrews puts it. Without hearing the story of the dawning faith of the Israelites, we cannot hope to understand Jesus Christ or the first Christians.

FAITH AS TRUST

There is, however, one similarity between Paul and Hebrews.

They have a similar definition of faith.

Hebrews says faith is a '*conviction of things not seen*', and Saint Paul says it is a hope in '*what we do not see*'.

This reminds us that faith isn't about certainty, it's about trust.

Rowan Williams helpfully suggests, that when we are struggling with the whole business of faith we should try thinking of it primarily in terms of trust.

When we say in the Creed, '*We believe in one God*', we should consider it as saying, '*We trust in one God*'.

Because faith is first and foremost about trust.

And Christians are people who believe God is to be trusted.

But here's a thought – are faith and belief the same thing?

Most of the time we use those words interchangeably, as if they were synonyms, but I'm not so sure. You can believe in the existence of something – let's say politicians or police – but not actually have faith in them, not actually trust them.

And it's absolutely true, that there are lots of people who say they believe in God, but who do not really have much faith – some of them are even Christians!

They don't demonstrate a trust in God in their thoughts, words and actions.

Perhaps all of us are like that, at least some of the time.

Trust is a necessity in any good relationship.

Without trust in politicians, government doesn't really work.

Without trust in institutions like the police or the health service, society doesn't work.

Without trust in a Christian community, the Church doesn't work.

Without trust in God, faith doesn't work.

The mysterious author of Hebrews knows that such faithful trust is both important and difficult, and we need all the help we can get, and so he (or she) gives us an example.

ABRAHAM OUR FATHER IN FAITH.

That example is Abraham, our Father in Faith. This is what is said about him:

'By faith Abraham obeyed when he was call to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance, and he set out, not knowing where he was going'.

He is held out at someone who embodies the virtues of faith.

He embraces the uncertainty of what it involved, not knowing where he was going, but placing all his trust in God. He stayed *'as in a foreign land'*, taking the risks that faith involves.

Abraham's example is one of faith rather than believe – it is faith made visible by a whole way of life not an intellectual assent.

If we had heard the Old Testament reading from Genesis this morning which is designed to go with Hebrews, we would have heard God's call to Abraham, and his absurd and wonderful promise that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Despite all appearances, from this poor, wandering nomad, would come a great people. God asks Abraham to trust him, as he leads him on a journey into a new land and a new life.

God calls Abraham to leave his land, his kindred and his father's house. In other words, he calls him to leave everything he knows and holds dear – his security, his protection, his comfort. He is called into a total reliance and a total trust in God, *'living in a foreign land, living in tents'* among strangers and in a state of impermanence.

This is the example of faith that Hebrews hold before us as what it means to live a life of faith. It reminds us that if we are too comfortable in our own faith, then God means to unsettle us, to take us by the hand and lead us on a journey into the exciting unknown. And the same is true for St Michael's as a church. Doing new things is risky and frightening, but it is something we must embrace if we are to make our faith visible to other people. And remember, when God leads us, he leads us to do big and bold things – Abraham was bold, Sarah was barren, and God's promise was they would be the parents not of a family but of an entire nation 'as innumerable as the grains of sand on the seashore'.

TOWARDS HEAVEN

If all this sounds rather daunting, even off-putting, then remember what we are journeying towards – nothing less than heaven itself.

Central to the faith of Hebrews is the vision of the Heavenly City and *'better country'*. The place that is truly home. What sustained Abraham and all our fathers in faith is that they looked out and *'from a distance they saw and greeted'* this heavenly home.

Yesterday was the feast of the Transfiguration, the day that remembers when the disciples saw a vision of Christ in glory, surrounded by Moses and Elijah – for He is the fulfilment of the Law and the prophets.

It is this vision of our heavenly home and the glory that awaits that keeps us going.

This hope that animates and refreshes us when we are getting tired on the journey.

We shall know then, what in this life, can be known only and in faith and trust.

Fr Stephen Stavrou