

Trinity 10, 2010

Twente & Arnhem

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Luke 12:32-40

Faith points us Home

The main subject of this sermon is Faith. You could argue that all sermons should have Faith as their subject, though I defer to 1 Corinthians 13 and agree with St Paul that Faith, Hope and Love are the 3 main themes, with Love topping the list. But Faith and Hope rank up there, and are connected to Love, and each other.

But Hebrews 11 is a textbook sermon on Faith. Yet it presents ideas about faith that challenge current thinking on Faith.

As theologian Jane Williams observes: 'Faith is sometimes presented as necessarily divorced from evidence. If you can prove something, then you don't need to have faith to believe it.' But that doesn't square with the theology of Hebrews at all. Williams argues that Hebrews suggests 'that faith is *not* an irrational decision to step out into the darkness, but something *chosen* and *calculated* on the basis of what is already *known* and *experienced*. Faith still has a strong element of risk and uncertainty, but it [clearly] isn't [to be compared to] just plain stupidity (which, I myself would add, is what a lot of the not terribly sophisticated critiques of faith would have us believe).

The Faith of the OT Patriarchs and Matriarchs (like Abraham and Sarah) can't be dismissed as some sort of unthinking fundamentalist view of religion. Fundamentalism requires a set of texts, and a will to interpret them literalistically and legalistically: ignoring other valid text-specific approaches like metaphorical, or allegorical interpretations, none of which deny the truths being taught, by the way. Anyway, there were no texts in Abraham and Sarah's day, only stories told round the fire or at meal times and the like. Their own faith came from 3 things: 1st, beliefs passed down to them and the ones they passed on – in other words, their tradition; 2nd, their personal experience, and 3rd, wisdom they got from reflecting on both

tradition and personal experience.

The Bible tells us God broke into Abraham's personal experience, revealing himself in an extraordinary way that changed his life. Abraham's experience of God started a traditions: He is the forefather of faith. Whichever of the 3 great monotheistic religions one might adhere to, whether Islam, Judaism or Christianity, you are a child of Abraham, if you have faith in the God of Abraham.

Abraham first enters the biblical record in Genesis 11:26 and does not exit until chapter 25, when he was buried in Machpelah, near Mamre, and 'gathered to his people' (8b).

But as Hebrews 11 reminds us, Abraham did not invent faith or have a monopoly on it. The author of Hebrews includes the following in his pantheon of the heroes of Faith: Abel, then Enoch (who, Gen 5, which gives a genealogy from Adam to Noah, is remarkable for this statement alone: '[Enoch] walked with God, then he was no more, because God took him away' (v24)); then Noah himself, Abraham himself, his wife Sarah, son Isaac, Isaac's son Jacob, Jacob's son Joseph, Moses' parents, Moses himself, the Israelites who followed Moses, those who followed Joshua at Jericho, Rahab the prostitute who hid Joshua's spies in Jericho.

After that great list, the author adds:

³²And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—
³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—³⁸of whom

the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

This is gripping stuff, but then the author adds: ³⁹Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect.'

It is fantastic – the stuff of legend – what all these heroes of faith went through. So it is incredible to conclude with something like: their hope, their faith, is unfulfilled without yours!!! But that's what Hebrews teaches!

Christians of the 1st C through the 21st and beyond are being invited to join in a great relay race of faith. It is now our turn to take the baton and run with it.

Don't blame me for the running metaphor! I like running, but the trope is all Hebrews 12: '12: ¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.'

Our finish line is not in this life, but the next. We don't have to be genetically-superior Olympic athletes to compete in the race that counts more than any other. We just need a bit of faith. Not even Olympian faith. Just enough to say, 'I believe that God sent his Son to save me and his world, and has given us his Spirit to help us and lead us.'

Jesus knew that it was hard to focus on the race of faith in this world. He knew how easily we get distracted by the dazzle and glitter of the world. Our earthly investments, our careers, our cars, our houses, our money or whatever always compete with what we really need to invest in: our

relationships, with God and with those God gives us to love. Perhaps the financial crisis has taught us something spiritual after all: invest more in what is eternal. Psalm 103:14-16, and a rock band hit in the 1970s, remind us, 'All we are is dust in the wind'. And to quote the band: 'And all your money won't another minute buy.'

It is better to travel light in this life, at least with respect to materialism. It is better instead to invest in a heavenly homecoming. It is never too late to let God free us. It is never too late to ¹⁷learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow,' as Isaiah explains.

If we have Faith, there is Hope for us and for the world, for the poor in spirit and even for the materially poor. '11: ¹Faith is the assurance of things hoped for.' Faith and Hope reinforce each other. Besides them, all we need is love, but that's the other sermon. Amen.