

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

FAITH

7th August 2016

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

I have always admired people who live by faith. By that I mean people who set out to do something, convinced that it is what God wants them to do, so that although they do not see how they will sustain life – how they will find a place to live, and food to eat – yet they trust God to provide these essentials for them, as they seek to do his will.

Our friend Sarah Pickworth is a bit like this, as she goes from one difficult and challenging situation to another, not always knowing where her support will come from, or how she will do the work she is called to, but trusting God to lead her and provide. Currently in Kabul in Afghanistan, she recently, at the end of Ramadan, was unexpectedly given access to a state orphanage in Afghanistan to give the children the traditional party. This party at the end of Ramadan is a bit like our Christmas, and is when Muslim children usually will be given gifts. Sarah had to find enough gifts, in a short time, and by the grace of God she did it, so that every child was able to know that at the end of the Muslim feast, Christians showed them the love and generosity of God. Now she has to find somewhere else to live as the recent bombs in Kabul have led to her sending organisation saying that her current accommodation is unsafe. Sarah asks for our prayers that God will provide something acceptable (to them, she is not complaining) in the next two weeks. Sarah lives by faith, and without meaning to, challenges us to think about how we live and where we find our security.

Yesterday at the Highland Games, St. Bride's church had their usual stall. But this year with people's purchases of soup and baking they were given a "bag of blessing" with a little bookmark with a Bible verse and a picture, an invitation to services, a piece of tablet and a tea bag. They were a small thing but a new thing, a new way to reach out, to show the faith by which we also live.

Our reading from Hebrews today is the beginning of the great chapter about faith. It begins with the author trying to define faith for us. He says that it is "The assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." He tells us that by faith the ancient people of God – or some of them- won God's approval. He tells us that it is by faith that we understand what we cannot see – that all of creation comes from the invisible God. Faith goes hand in hand with hope, but it is more than hope, because hope without faith is mere optimism, which cannot sustain a life, but faith is something on which we can act with surety. Faith is more than belief, it is belief on which you build your life.

This is deep stuff. And maybe the writer realises this, because having tried in the abstract to define faith for us, he then gives a whole chapter of illustrations. It is this

assurance, this faith that underlies all the lives he now talks about. Lives of people whose stories are known to us from the Old Testament.

Mind you, the illustrations do not spell out what these various individuals, Abel, Enoch, and Noah in the verses we didn't read, and Abraham all believed. Hebrews' writer is not concerned with the individual tenets of belief. He is concerned with faith, which is to say, faithfulness. We have two words, though obviously related, faith and faithfulness. Faith is what you trust in and faithfulness is how you hold to that trust. But Greek has the one word, *pistis* which means faith and faithfulness. It comes from a root which is related to the idea of persuasion, so faith is what people have been persuaded of by God. And faithfulness is how that persuasion, that faith is worked out in their lives. And they are two sides of the same coin. No faith without faithfulness and no faithfulness without faith.

So today we read what the writer to the Hebrews had to say about Abraham, how it was his faith in God's calling and God's purposes for him and God's presence with him which led him to leave his homeland and set out into the unknown, living the rest of his life as a foreigner in a temporary situation, as did Isaac and Jacob. It was his faithfulness to what he knew of God which enabled him to have a son into old age. And our unknown writer makes the point that Abraham, Isaac or Jacob, or in a different way Noah, Enoch or Abel, these people of faithfulness are people on a journey. People who live by faith are those seeking a homeland and who don't mind camping out in temporary situations till they reach it.

In fact, from the viewpoint of the New Testament, which is also where we stand, in the grace of God given to us through Jesus - from that viewpoint everyone before Jesus was camping out in one way or another. Yes, after Moses the people of God had a land and proper homes and so on, but those who lived by faith – faithfulness – were looking for more: they were looking for God's presence with them. The people who lived by faith were those who sought more than just life for the here and now.

This great chapter on faith goes on to talk a lot about Moses, and then the author runs out of steam and refers to many people in passing: Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets – and I love that these are far from perfect people; their faults are well chronicled, but still they can be held up as heroes of faith. He also refers to others obliquely; those who conquered, administered, saw prayers answered, shut lions' mouths (who would that be?), suffered in various ways and so on. And all of them were on a journey, because that is what living by faith means. It doesn't just mean living without knowing how your physical needs will be met – for some people at some times it does mean that, but that is to restrict what it means. Living by faith means living in faithfulness to God, in hope, in the belief that this world is, in the end, ephemeral, and that we are daily moving, or seeking to move, closer to the God who made and loves and calls us.

Faith is shown by faithfulness. This is the point which, eight centuries before Christ, Isaiah was trying to hammer home to the people of Judah. We might think of Isaiah as the man who gave the beautiful prophecies of the suffering servant, epitomising God's sacrificial love for his people, but here at the beginning of his life's work, here he is getting people's attention by telling them that the religious duties which were being performed in a spirit of, well, of duty and perhaps boredom, were nauseating to God. Religious duties were being performed then people went off to live as they thought best, running after their own interests, running after other gods if they thought this would

serve their own interests. And Isaiah is the mouthpiece to call them back to faithfulness.

Faith is not shown by religious duty, but by the way that life is lived. So God says “Cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” (v:17) The people are called to be faithful rather than successful. Faithful, not successful. That is the challenge to the church as well. I was once in a meeting with various ministers talking about church growth. After much had been mentioned by way of programmes and success stories – because ministers like to boast, you know, they like people to think that they are running a successful church – one man, who had been silent spoke up. “My church is still there,” he said. “In the light of our history and the forces ranged against us, it may not seem much, but the faithfulness of my folk is wonderful, and we are still there.”

All of us would like to see our churches full, and most of us want this for the best of reasons – because we want our neighbours to know what we have discovered about the love of God. All of us want to see our churches full, and we spend time and effort working out ways in which we might reach out to those who we never see among us. This is good and right. But we should be careful in case our desire to be “successful” – and who said a full church was a success? Who defined success in that way? – in case our desire to be successful becomes stronger than the love for God which inspires us to be faithful.

Being faithful does not mean making no changes. Our faith is in God, not in church structures, and our faithfulness is to him alone. Being faithful actually means remembering that we are on a journey, as individuals but also as a people of God, and being prepared to take steps in that journey. Too often the church has thought of faithfulness as rigidity, when the opposite is true. The people of faith commended in Hebrews are those who know that here we have no permanent home, they are those who would not seek to turn back the clock by returning to the homes which they had left, even though that option was open to them. Faithfulness to God means moving forward with him, allowing that faith, which is what we have learned of him, to give us hope and confidence in his presence and his love so that we may try new things.

So whether it is the calling to leave home and work and family and put your life on the line in serving God and others, or whether it is giving out little bags of blessing, or whether it is holding fast to your hope when life seems to turn against you, or whether it is other ways in which God calls us to move forward, let us be people of faith and of faithfulness. Our faith is in the work of Jesus on the cross, work which we believe redeemed each of us and indeed the whole world. Our faith gives us a foundation on which to build, a road along which to travel and confidence and hope that God always goes with us, so we are never alone. Amen.