

Pentecost 11C, 8th August, 2010
Faith Is
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

From Martin Luther King Jr.: a graphic definition of faith: “Faith is taking the first step, even when you don't see the whole staircase.”

From Corrie Ten Boom: “Faith is like radar that sees through the fog.”

And how about this : “Faith can move mountains, but don't be surprised if God hands you a shovel”.

Faith is one of those words that has been given many profound and witty definitions. At the same time, it's something that is often greatly misunderstood, and has been subjected to some bad teaching.

There are many distorted ideas of what it is. Like me, you may have grappled with some of these in your Christian journey. You may need to grapple with them now.

Faith, for instance, is not positive thinking; that is something quite different.

Faith is not a hunch that is followed.

Faith is not hoping for the best, hoping that everything will turn out all right.

Faith is not a feeling of optimism.

Faith is not privatised –it's not something that we receive, that we then tuck away for our own private benefit and enjoyment. Faith is expressed in community, for community and for the world.

Faith is not something we can manipulate, just as we cannot manipulate God through our piety or works or holy offerings into making things turn out the way we think they should, even if that way appears to be wholly consistent with what we think God would want.

Neither is faith a set of beliefs; head-knowledge of an intellectual sort, that affirms doctrines, propositions or creeds. Faith is something other than –larger than– believing in specific things about God, Christ and the Christian life. It's not about intellectual knowledge. Great Father of the Reformation, Martin Luther, went so far as to say: “Reason is a whore, the greatest enemy that faith has.”

Faith is none of these things, though all of them have been identified as faith.

Now let's turn to what faith is. The anonymous writer to the Hebrews tackles faith head on in our second reading this morning, in the only definition of faith given in the Scriptures.

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it, those who have gone before us were affirmed by God. By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of

God, so that what is seen was made out of things that are not visible".
(11:1-3)

As we look more closely at this whole passage, three things are critical.

First, we are pointed to the invisible reality of God – the “things not seen”: what is “seen was made out of things that are not visible.” Faith includes our attitude, conviction or trust that there is an invisible, spiritual realm that is as real as the visible, external environment in which we live from day to day. Another way of putting that is to say that faith, then, is the openness to see the invisible in the visible, the eternal in the earthly.

The second critical point is that it becomes clear that we are talking about the faithfulness of God, as much as we might be talking about faith as something that is about ourselves. And to bring home to us what this faithfulness of God in which our faith is grounded is, the writer reminds his audience of the faith stories of old. In these, we find the dual action of faith: we take the step, and God is faithful, whether we end up where we thought we might want to be or not.

And the third critical point- the one that emerges from these biblical examples - is that faith involves action. It involves risk; stepping out; journeying. If we have the resolve, it's not a big step to then act on it.

In these stories of the ancestors in the faith, Abraham is held up as the great example. Recall that when God called Abraham away from his country and kinsfolk, there was no covenant relationship between God and humankind in place, no chosen people, no Hebrew religion. There were no ancient writings or Scriptures that told stories of faith. And there were none of the later marks or rituals of religion that distinguished the Hebrew people after Moses – so Abraham, like so many who would follow, could not fall into the trap that faith was the same as observing or keeping religious rules. A trap many even these days fall into.

Abraham's story marks the beginning of God choosing a specific people; it starts with God's promise that he would make of Abraham a “great nation”. And “Abraham went, as the Lord had told him” (*Gen 12:4*) – not knowing where he was going. He just set out, trusting God to show the way. His trust was stretched in places – far too old for child-bearing, there was the doubtful promise of a child. And whilst that might seem like a nice gift for him and Sarah- it was in fact a gift not for them, but for the future of God's chosen people.

They, of course, received the fulfilment of the promise of a child – Isaac – but for the rest of what was promised – the settling in the land which God would give them, the establishing of a great nation (the Hebrew nation) – they didn't ever get to experience. They “died *in faith*, without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them”.

What can we take from this story? Abraham took the risk to respond to God's call, to step out into a new and untested reality, even if that seemed far beyond reason or expectation. The fact that all did not come to eventuate in his lifetime did not strike out his faith. It didn't make a mockery of God's promises. Faith stretched beyond his slice of the story. And that's how it is with faith – the step is into the unknown, and

what we discover is a gift from God –however different it may be from we hoped for. For faith is the willingness and the resolve to trust God – to trust in the goodness of God's purposes for us and for all of creation.

The stories of faith offered to us are all forward looking. There is no turning back and dwelling in the past. God's people are a journeying people –on the move to the home that is the eternal presence of God. On the move, by faith, to somewhere and something we can neither see nor prove nor pre-determine or manipulate. Even here, in our worship, we sing, pray and speak, with faith that God is receiving our offerings of praise and worship. We partake of the Eucharist with faith that God is present with us and in the bread and wine. We step into this place and time of worship in faith, not knowing what God may speak into our lives today; not knowing where God will lead us.

Before we listen to a prayer to finish, pause for a moment's reflection: are you leading a safe- albeit good – life of *religion*, or are you prepared for the risk, the step in faith that God is calling you to?

In case you think that faith is something beyond your capacity, is something that requires some sort of monumental leaps, let this prayer from the great twentieth century mystic, Thomas Merton, illustrate the kernel of faith in action:

MY LORD GOD, I have no idea where I am going.
 I do not see the road ahead of me.
 I cannot know for certain where it will end.
 Nor do I really know myself,
 and the fact that I think that I am following your will
 does not mean that I am actually doing so.
 But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.
 And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
 I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
 And I know that if I do this,
 you will lead me by the right road
 though I may know nothing about it.
 Therefore will I trust you always
 though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
 I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
 and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.