

Faith

A sermon for St Paul's 23rd September 2007

A temporary Sunday School teacher was struggling to open a combination lock on the supply cupboard.

She had been told the combination, but couldn't quite remember it. Finally she went into the vicar's office and asked for help.

The vicar came out into the room and began to turn the dial on the combination lock. After the first two numbers he paused and stared blankly for a moment. Then he looked serenely heavenward and his lips moved silently.

Then he looked back at the lock, and quickly turned to the final number, and opened the lock. The teacher was amazed. "I am in awe of your faith, vicar," she said.

"It's really nothing," he answered.

"The number is on a piece of sticky tape on the ceiling."

I want to explore just a few ideas around this topic of faith. What is faith? Are there different kinds of faith? Can faith and doubt exist at the same time?

Our two readings this morning talk about faith, but these are only two of scores of times that faith is discussed in the Bible. In the New International Version of the Bible, the word *faith* is mentioned 246 times. And if you add in all the *faith* variants, like *faithful* and *faithless* and words with similar meanings like *assurance* and *conviction* and *belief* you will find, if you have a computer program like mine, that these words occur 537 times in the NIV.

Ken gave me the first reading. This is the story about the centurion's faith. He had so much faith in Jesus that he believed his servant could be healed, merely by Jesus saying the word.

I chose the second reading to give us the opportunity to see a different kind of faith. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews, describes this different kind of faith. The faith of Noah and Abraham. A faith in *being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see*.

You see there are different kinds of faith.

One comedian has decided to re-write Hebrews chapter 11. He decided that it was a bit old-fashioned and irrelevant to modern times to use the examples of the old faithful's like Noah and Abraham who *by faith* embark on extraordinary adventures. So instead, he rewrote these *by faith* examples in modern terms.

Let's see if you recognise any of these examples of people who acted *by faith*.

By faith, John did not curse and cause a scene when he saw that his favourite parking place was taken in the church parking lot, but instead, quietly parked somewhere else.

By faith, Tony stayed awake throughout the entire church service 2 weeks in a row.

By faith, Bob did not despair of life or return to drugs and alcohol when he heard the news that his teenage daughter wanted to get a tattoo.

By faith, Bob's wife did not kill Bob when she learned that Bob said it was OK for their teenage daughter to get the tattoo, as long as it was on her foot.

By faith, Sheila, who forgot to pick up her new dress at the cleaners, went to church anyway, even though she knew that Rita was going to look more fashionable.

By faith, George did not return the symbolic hand gesture from the driver next to him, which was given because George would not allow the driver to get into the lane in front of him.

By faith, Fran and Eric bought their 6-year-old son a new video tape of children's cartoon Bible stories to watch with his favourite baby sitter on his birthday while they went to the church seminar on family relations.

By faith, Fran and Eric promised to spend some quality time with their 6-year-old son one weekend very soon.

By faith, Fran and Eric's six-year-old son prayed that God would keep him from hating his parents.

By faith, Mark and Helen sat next to Irfan, a man of a different culture than they, at church on Wednesday.

By faith, Irfan forgave Mark and Helen for ignoring him during the entire service.

By faith, Mrs. Belamy (who donated the flowers placed on the table in front of the pulpit) did not get angry when her name was misspelled in the pew sheet.

By faith, the Ladies of the Church group forgave Mrs. Belamy for refusing to buy flowers for the next Sunday's service.

By faith, the recently fired pastor of High Street Anglican Church believed that God would lead him to a new parish.

By faith, the wardens of High Street Anglican Church believed that God would restore the \$30,000.00 missing from the church's general account.

What more shall I say? There is not enough time to mention the many suburban, middleclass Christians who attend church weekly, pay their tithes faithfully, smile regularly, drink moderately, prepare their taxes honestly, and drive safely. Since we are surrounded by such a great fog of witnesses, should we not also persevere in faith?

The good news is that faith is available to us all, no matter how weak or sinful or petty we sometimes may be.

As Paul wrote to the Ephesians: It is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.

And furthermore there are two kinds of faith that God grants us.

First, there is faith or belief that, and then there is faith in. Faith *that* and faith *in*.

In our readings today, I reckon the centurion shows the first kind of faith. He has faith *that* Jesus' word will be effectual in healing his servant. And I reckon that Noah and Abraham show the second kind of faith. Faith *in*. Noah and Abraham have faith *in* God.

What's the difference between the centurion's faith and Abraham's?

Well, the centurion had two things going for him that helped him to have faith that Jesus would heal his servant. First, he had obviously heard the news about Jesus. The story had got around. Jesus was a major league healer. The centurion heard and believed these reports, much like any good soldier would rely on reports from the war zone.

Secondly, he was trained in authority. He automatically respected those in authority. He had an in-built predisposition to believe that someone who was a leader, had authority.

So when his servant got sick, it was no great leap of faith for the centurion to say, "I've heard of this Jesus fellow. I bet he can heal my servant."

He had faith in what he knew about Jesus. Faith based on the evidence. Faith based on his experience. Faith based on his reasoning.

You and I exhibit this kind of faith all the time.

I presume none of us knows how to fly a jumbo jet. Certainly Judy and I don't. Yet we blissfully got into a Qantas jet last month and flew all the way to America.

We had faith that the plane was in good shape. We had faith that the pilots were well trained and sober. Our faith was based on experience and reasoning. We had flown many times before. We knew Qantas had a reputation for reliability, and especially for not falling out of the sky unexpectedly.

Of course, when the plane's sound system malfunctions, or you notice that a screw on the fold down table is missing, your faith is a little undermined. I start wondering. If their maintenance of the fold-down tables isn't so good, how good is their maintenance of the engines.

I guess this is an example of faith enough to doubt.

But, like I say, we have *faith that* all the time.

We have faith in our household appliances. We get up in the morning. The lights work. The kettle boils. The radio is on Light-FM. The car starts.

And most of the time, this *faith that* is perfectly justified.

Everyone has faith about something. Even sceptics have faith. They have faith that their scepticism is true. Atheists have faith that there is no God. There are no neutral positions when it comes to belief.

One has to say that a strong faith is a very attractive thing. Even when we feel it may not be justified.

For example, a young woman brings home the man she wants to marry, so that he can have a heart-to-heart with her Dad.

After dinner, the father invites the young man into his study for a drink. "So what are your plans?" the father asks the young man.

"I'm going to be a Bible scholar," he replies.

"A Bible scholar. Hmmmm" the father says. "Admirable, but how will you buy her a beautiful engagement ring such as she deserves?"

"I will concentrate on my studies," the young man replies. "I have faith that God will provide for us."

"And what will you do to provide a nice house for my daughter to live in?" asks the father.

"I will study," the young man replies, "and I have faith that God will provide for us."

"And children?" asks the father. "How will you support children?"

"Don't worry, sir, I have faith that God will provide," replies the young man. The conversation goes on like this and each time the father asks a question, the young idealist insists on his faith that God will provide.

Later the mother asks, "How did it go, honey?"

The father answers, "He has no job and no plans, but the good news is, he thinks I'm God."

That story makes me think about the *other* kind of faith. The centurion's faith is faith based on reason and experience. Nothing wrong with that kind of faith at all.

But there's another kind of faith. Not faith *that*, but faith *in*.

As it says in Hebrews, it is *being sure of what we hope for and being certain of what we do not see*. There is something quite irrational and illogical about this kind of faith. Sometimes it is faith *despite* the evidence, or faith *despite* the risk.

When I was a boy there was a hit song by a group called the Kingston Trio. The song was called *Desert Pete*. You see, a prospector got lost in the desert and when his water had run out and it looked like he was going to die in the desert, he came upon a pump.

But there was a catch that required enormous faith.

Play song

What would you have done? Drink the water in the bitters jar? Or would you have had faith *in* Desert Pete?

At one level, faith in Desert Pete seems quite irrational. But this is the faith of being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. Yes, it is a risky kind of faith if your faith is only in Desert Pete. But perhaps rather less risky if you believe in the God who created the universe, the God who knows and cares for you individually.

You see, this is one of the important things about faith. It is not how much faith we have that's important. It's what we put our faith *in* that matters.

When you sat down in church today, you had faith in the chair. It didn't matter how *much* faith you had in the chair. Sometimes, when we are going through hard times we say "If only I had more faith!" Yet our faith is in the chair, now in how much faith we have.

So it is with God. If we believe anything about God at all, we must recognise that our faith in Him is justified. He is worthy of our faith.

So even if our moods change, even if we are sometimes depressed, even if sometimes we feel our faith is weak, God remains worthy of our faith. He is trustworthy.

Even if you came into church today worrying about whether the chair would collapse under you, I can tell you that our church chairs are worthy of your faith. God is like that, except more so.

The wonderful thing about this is that it gives us freedom to have faith and still have doubts.

Did any of you see this article recently about Mother Theresa?

It was in TIME magazine. It's titled "Mother Theresa's Crisis of Faith" and it demonstrates to me how little TIME magazine understands about faith itself.

The article puts two statements alongside one another. On the one hand there are Mother Theresa's public statements about Christ's presence everywhere "Christ in our hearts, Christ in the poor we meet, Christ in the smile we give and in the smile we receive."

On the other hand, there are her private writings to her confessor, "As for me," Mother Theresa wrote, "the silence and emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear, the tongue moves in prayer but does not speak."

The TIME writer calls this a "crisis of faith." Well sorry. I think he's got it completely the wrong way round. It's a victory of faith. Despite the hard times, despite the dryness, some of it, apparently extending into years, Mother Theresa NEVER lost her faith. Always, she had faith enough to doubt.

As Paul Tournier said, "He who claims never to have doubted does not know what faith is, for faith is forged through doubt." Faith is *forged* through doubt. I think he used the word *forged* quite deliberately. You know what a forge is, don't you. It's a red-hot oven in which metal is heated. And it's also a machine that hammers pieces of metal into new shapes.

That's what doubt does to faith. It hammers our faith into new, stronger shapes.

I think it is nicely ironic that this alleged crisis of faith story was also told about another great Christian saint, also called Theresa.

St Therese lived in the late 19th century in France. She was a Carmelite nun and she became famous for a book called "Story of a Soul." After she died it was revealed that this spiritual giant had experienced long times of spiritual dryness despite always seeming to be the most contented Christian in the world.

Sceptics, of course, interpret this as spiritual dishonesty or hypocrisy. People of faith just know it as the true condition of all who are prepared to be sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

Do you have doubts? You're in good company.

Do you have faith? You're in the same company.

We are in the company of Martin Luther who famously spoke a prayer that has become known as the doubter's prayer:

Dear Lord,

Although I am sure of my position,

I am unable to sustain it without You.

Help me, or I am lost.

The fields were parched and brown from lack of rain, and the crops lay wilting from thirst. People were anxious and irritable as they searched the sky for any sign of relief. Days turned into arid weeks. No rain came.

The ministers of the local churches called for an hour of prayer in the town square the following Saturday. They asked that everyone bring with them an object of faith for inspiration.

At midday on the next Saturday the people of the town all turned out, filling the square with anxious faces and hopeful hearts. The ministers were touched to see the variety of inspirational objects clutched in prayerful hands – Bibles, crosses, rosary beads.

When the hour ended, as if on a magical command, a soft rain began to fall. Cheers swept through the crowd as they held their treasured inspirational objects high in gratitude and praise. Bibles, crosses, rosary beads, all held high.

But there was one sign of faith that overshadowed them all. In the middle of the crowd, a nine year old child, held up what he had brought. He opened an umbrella.