



**11<sup>th</sup> August 2019**  
**Luke 12.32-40**  
**Hebrews 11.1-3, 8-16**

## **Faith – Hope made Visible?**

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*Lord God our prayer is that you might touch my lips, open our hearts & transform our lives in the power of the Spirit and for the honour of Christ. Amen.*

George Michael sang that 'you've gotta have faith', and we in the Church talk about faith all the time.

That talk can be both negative and positive. Some, amongst us, find belief and pilgrimage so tough that they tell us they have 'lost' their faith. When that happens we simply want to hold out the hand of friendship and leave the door of the church wide open. Our hope is, I think, that whenever we feel we have lost God, that he has never lost us and always loves us.

Other people gladden our hearts and talk about finding faith for the first time, or having their faith re-energised or strengthened. Most of us go through phases in our discipleship. Moments of struggle and seasons of wholeness, both can be times of growth for our faith.

In 2011 the Methodist Conference bucked the trend of other Free Churches and commissioned a new hymn book called: *Singing the Faith*. That's an appropriate title for a denomination said to have been born in song through the hymns of Charles Wesley. And actually, for many churches like ours, that don't traditionally include creeds in our liturgy, we express the essence of faith and often even learn the deepest lessons about faith, through the hymns and songs we sing Sunday by Sunday.

The opening verse of today's reading from the book of Hebrews offers us a two line definition of faith by describing it as something that 'gives substance to our hopes and convinces us of the realities we do not see'.

Perhaps we could distil that down even further then and say that our hopes and longings often forms the basis of our faith.

It becomes clear in the context of Hebrews that the Christians being addressed here are struggling with faith at this moment. They are losing hope. In the previous chapter we are told many of them seem to have given up meeting together and that others were living under the threat of the state requisitioning their property.

Living as a Christian in that first century after Jesus was often fraught with harsh opposition. Yet maybe it's true that every generation is tempted to feel that theirs is the toughest of times.

We live at a pivotal moment in European history with the political landscape both this and the other side of 'the Pond' looking different to the conventions that have gone before.

We also live at a time when the numbers needed for the Church to feel it has a critical mass in the UK seem to be slipping away.

It's easy to overlook what generations before us have had to face and overcome. So, it's at this point that Hebrews 11 calls on its readers to take on board the perspective of history when it comes to faith.

In a way that's what old fashioned Church Anniversary services used to do. They reminded us of those who had made this journey before us.

I grew up with Church Anniversaries. We had to wear a flower in our lapel on Anniversary Sunday – incredible to think that even as an eight year old I was already wearing a jacket that had a lapel!

My minister often told the story of preaching at an anniversary service in a Baptist church in the Welsh Valleys. In the service they took up an offering and counted it whilst he was preaching. On one occasion they decided it wasn't enough so asked him to extend his sermon and then pass the plate around a second time.

I suspect the days of big annual Church Anniversary services are over. Yet maybe our thoughts around All Saints and All Souls tide take us to a similar place of thanksgiving. A moment to recall with gratitude those who walked the road of faith before us and didn't give up.

History, in a sense, makes the hopes and dreams, in a way the faith, of a previous generation visible.

Many who have gone before us never really saw those longings come to fruition. Think of those whose names are inscribed on the Amersham Martyrs memorial, people like James Morden and Joan Norman, burnt at the stake here in our town because they wanted to read the bible in their own tongue in their own home, not hear it in Latin whilst it was chained to a church reading desk. Theirs was a courage and conviction which spoke volumes about their faith and history justifies their hopes and dreams. The perspective of history doesn't end with their deaths but shows that all they longed for came to be with the eventual publication in 1611 of the Authorised Version of the Bible that was freely distributed and made available to all. Theirs was a hope eventually realised, yet not in their lifetime.

And that's what verse one of Hebrews 11 says of faith, that it convinces us of realities we do not see and therefore gives substance to our hopes.

I remember one of the most colourful deacons I've ever known, at one of my churches, who had a passion to see his son back in church. But his son never came and the years rolled on by. My friend never lost hope, he would pray for his son and ask us to pray as well. Eventually he died and his son came along to the funeral service and found a real sense of love for both him and his father in the people he met. And, ironically yet wonderfully, since then he's been at church week by week.

We don't see the whole picture, we can't. But we thank God that those campaigning for the end of the Slave Trade didn't give up even though many of them died with nothing

seeming to change. We thank God that they kept the faith.

In a way, history makes the hopes of a generation visible and people like Trevor Huddlestone, the English priest working in Soweto, was right to believe that black and white could worship and serve God together. He kept on believing that even though during his ministry in Johannesburg that never came about as a reality.

So, today's reading speaks of the faith, the persistent faith of God's servants such as Noah, Abraham and Sarah who served God and their communities. It makes faith into a national aspiration, if not a characteristic.

The genius of all the examples quoted is that their narrative was often marked by moments of despair and confusion. Noah, we are told, took heed of the divine warning of an unseen future. Abraham obeyed the call to leave his home and set out on a journey to an unknown destination. Sarah believed she would bear a child even though her age told her that was impossible.

These national stories of faith are deliberately set in context of despair. This sort of faith wasn't easy or obvious. Indeed, by verse 13 we are told that although all these giants from Israel's past died in the faith, not all of them had even received the things promised.

So, I'm left pondering this week a question: what does it really mean to have faith in God?

I've come to the conclusion that it's fundamentally about believing in God's love – and continuing to believe that, to hold onto that through thick and thin.

As Paul finishes writing his beautiful poem in 1 Corinthians 13 he says: Now these three remain, faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love.

Why isn't faith the greatest? Why isn't hope the most important? Isn't it because you need to have faith in something, and it's similar with hope.

Our faith and hope is in God and his all encompassing love.

I'm not called to have faith in the rules of the Church or the dogma of theologians. My hope isn't in a fallible institution or temporary leader. The focus of our worship and the inspiration of our service is this God of love revealed to us in Jesus and made real to us through the Holy Spirit. Our faith and our hope is in a God of love who brings meaning, wholeness and completion to our lives.

I think that's a faith and hope worth hanging on to.

A commentator I read whilst preparing this sermon talked of the 'empowering' nature of faith. I confess I more and more shy away from talking about power when it comes to faith but I think she meant something else here. I think she was simply saying that our lives can be so energised by the love of God that finds a sense of meaning in our world even at the toughest of moments. The love of God carries us through the storm or refreshes us as we trek through the desert of life.

There is a prayer come poem that is often quoted on this theme, but I don't think it loses

any of its poignancy because of its familiarity. It comes from the bleakest days of WWII and was found in the cellar of a concentration camp in Cologne, written by a Jewish person facing death:

*I believe in the sun  
even when it is not shining  
And I believe in love,  
even when there's no one there.  
And I believe in God,  
even when he is silent.*

Well, I don't know about you, but I think that prayer is a beautiful and deeply moving definition of faith.

Jesus, in facing his own death upon the cross of Calvary also showed us, I think, what faith might look like.

Both in Gethsemane's Garden the night before and as he was crucified Jesus' faith is tested to the limit. In the Garden he even asks that 'the cup might be taken' from him and on the cross prays that Psalm of dereliction 'Why have you forsaken me'.

Even our Lord knew moments when it was hard to cling on to faith.

Yet, even at these bleakest times Jesus regains that sense of conviction and even hope which is the bedrock of faith. He prays 'Not mine but your will be done', he is 'empowered' by such conviction to offer forgiveness to those who brutally murdered him and he is motivated by hope to such an extent that he entrusts his mother to the care of John.

This month Michael is featuring on the vestibule monitor the lives of those after whom our side rooms are named here at AFC. All were people of faith and in their own way would be worthy of a mention in Hebrews 11 if it was an ever continuing chapter. Cartwright and Owen made a stand for religious freedom in this country, Wesley motivated a whole generation to a deeper faith and Carey galvanised his wing of the Church to share the gospel overseas.

Faith – it needs to be grounded in the reality of our everyday lives. It gives substance to our hopes and convinces us of the dreams we hold dear when those hopes and realities find their focus in the love that is always and forever at the centre of God's character.

May our longings and convictions grow in persistence as we, alongside all who have walked before, seek to put our faith in the love expressed in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham, 6<sup>th</sup> August 2019*