

Endurance in Faith. 11 Aug 0800 HC & 1830 Evensong
Readings: Heb 11:1-3, 8-16; Lk 12: 32-40; Ps 108. Mike Terry

Pray. Today I believe I should be talking about faith and endurance. This is prompted by recent meetings with baptism families and our readings today. I wrote the bulk of this before happening on the two short chapters on faith in CS Lewis' excellent 'Mere Christianity' which confirmed my leading to talk on this topic; I commend Lewis' book to you!

Firstly, what is faith? Hebrews gives a great and concise definition of faith: do learn Ch11:v1 by heart! Hebrews continues by showing how Abraham's faith actively shaped his whole life, despite him not often seeing God visibly at work. Indeed you may say he endured an awful lot of hanging around with not much to show for it most of the time. Read Genesis Chs 11-25. Consider Abraham's age in each story and you'll see what I mean.

Then in our Gospel reading we hear Jesus commanding us to be attentive to what's happening around us spiritually, and not to allow ourselves to get distracted, whatever the temptation or whatever the time of day or night we're needed. It's a call to a steadfast, enduring service underpinned and driven by faith, ie the knowledge that the groom will return at some undetermined point.

Both readings talk about faith being something real, concrete, a thing that changes the direction of our lives, giving us a purpose in the present and a certainty for the future. It's a faith for the everyday moment, and it's also a faith that holds us in the apparent absence of God even over stretches of time. It's a faith which both endures and breeds endurance.

Yet when I talk to people outside the church about faith they describe a vague notion of "something beyond" or say "I like to think there's something to keep us safe" or even "I just trust things will be OK in the end". This is a kind of faith, but it worries me they don't know what it is that they have faith in! What they have is insubstantial and not strong enough to carry them through life at all.

Others are disparaging about faith, saying it's an airy-fairy crutch for weaker people to lean on, a sop to deal with the hard times of life. They would claim to be the "realists" whereas we religious ones are "fantasists" who act out of blind faith and ignore scientific reality. Such voices are strong in our culture at the moment and are undermining the Christian ethos on which our nation's laws and moral standards are built. How can we counter them?

I believe their arguments are wrong on so many levels but let's go back to Heb 11:1 because faith is neither airy-fairy nor blind. Rather, as that Hebrews reading defines it, faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. Faith is something sure and certain. Faith is trust in God in a way that affects and changes our behaviour in a positive and obvious manner. In 'normal' life we do things or don't do things for people because we trust, or don't trust them. That's all that faith is – trust! If you trust someone you'll do what they say almost despite any obvious risk: look at a child jumping off a ledge into his father's arms because the father promised to catch them! Such faith conquers fear, even fear of embarrassment! Without faith in the father the child would never learn to trust their parents. Described as such, it's easy to see that faith is decidedly NOT insubstantial or airy-fairy! It produces results!

It's the same with our Christian faith. God is utterly reliable. But we must always remember that his ways are so much higher than our ways: our finite minds cannot grasp his eternal perspectives and purposes. Having faith is not an automatic ticket to getting what we want. Even Abraham and

the other ancients did not receive what they hoped for, but they trusted God that the promise would be delivered in due time. Thus faith is about trusting God for things we don't see yet, things still to come, not about our own agenda.

What about endurance in faith? I hear some say their faith has died. Maybe that's because they weren't getting what they'd wanted or expected. So they'd turned their backs on God; their faith didn't endure through the whole journey. Or maybe they'd allowed their hearts to be distracted from heavenly treasures and they'd substituted earthly ones instead, which is what Jesus warns against. They'd literally taken their eye off the faith ball and lost that certainty about what they couldn't yet see. Abraham's own father, Terah may have done this. He left Mesopotamia for Canaan but failed to reach it. He stopped half-way at a place called Haran which archaeologists say had every mod-con known to the ancient world. So much better than living in tents in a place yet to be seen. So Terah faded out of God's story: we hear no more of him in the whole of the rest of the Bible's salvation history. He failed to endure in his faith and to bring it to fruition. Letting his faith slip and missing out on inheriting what God intended for him. Abraham was left to continue the mission. Thus it happens, it seems, to those who abandon their faith or don't let it shape their whole lives.

Are we like Terah in our faith, settling in a place that's not our final destination, becoming satisfied with something less than God has for us, however attractive it seems? Jesus calls us to be watchful, attentive so that our hearts are not distracted by 'earthly treasures' and so we are not surprised by God's coming. This is why we must endure and grow in our faith.

So, faith is not a crutch for the weak. Nor is it airy-fairy and insubstantial. Our faith is a real thing that should produce real outcomes in our lives. That calls for growth **in** faith, and endurance **of** faith.

So don't rest on your laurels, however long you've been on this faith journey. Work on growing your faith, like a pianist perfecting scales in order to improve their playing. Learn more about the reliability of the Bible; read it often, as you would any good book. Ask us questions about the hard bits. Also read other Christian books, like 'Mere Christianity' which I mentioned before. Its language may be a little old fashioned for today's taste, but the concepts are good. Get hold of the big picture of God's intentions for his creation and us, his creatures. It will feed you mind, your spirit and grow your faith, your trust in God, and your joy! And, lastly, don't compare the apparent strength of your faith with that of others: the most important thing is the strength and reliability of the one in whom you have faith - Jesus! He **will** accompany us to our final destination in that heavenly country noted in Hebrews. As Jesus said, "Don't be afraid little flock, for your father has been pleased to give you the kingdom." That's sure, and it's certain! AMEN