

Sermon 18/08/19 – The cost of faith

Prayer: As we dwell on your word this morning, awaken in us deep faith, boldness and courage we pray.

It's the middle of the summer holidays – people are away having fun in the sun – time for a nice gentle sermon to send us out on a sunny weekend to go and be nice to people..... or is it?? As I looked through the two readings I found words like torture, jeers, flogging, chains, imprisonment – even being sawn in two – so spoiler alert – this may not after all be a “nice” sermon – in fact far from it, this is uncomfortable.

[Actually, even in admitting that you may find this uncomfortable I am taking a risk. If I make you feel uncomfortable, or even offended by what I say, I am at risk of being accused of committing a hate crime or of attempting to radicalise you. Our standards in society are now to be measured by how people *feel* as we speak and act – if I speak out and you don't like it, then in the world's view I am at fault!

With that risk in mind,] let's take a look at the two passages we have heard this morning, and see what we can glean, and then look at what that means today. Although my main focus will be on the letter to the Hebrews, I want to just start with the Gospel.

In the early part of Luke's gospel we meet the Jesus we all like to think about and emulate – we have the stories of his childhood, his early ministry healing the sick, and telling people the good news in parables we love to recall. It seems as if in following Jesus we need to be nice and kind and if we walk in this faith then life will be fine! But then the tone starts to change [–Jesus is increasingly antagonising the religious authorities, and is preparing his disciples for his death and resurrection. Although we grasp this quite easily with the benefit of hindsight, it must have been quite baffling for the disciples].

And in the midst of it comes one of Jesus clearest statements of his mission: “I have come to bring fire on the earth, how I wish it were already kindled!” Jesus is using old testament imagery to tell us he is coming as the Judge of all the earth, and we forget that at our peril! He goes on to warn us that the cost of walking in faith will be division and conflict – families divided down the middle – opposition and confrontation. Jesus knows that his return is not going to be a happy tea party [– take a read of Revelation some time, it's not easy stuff, bowls of fire and plagues, Jesus as the reaper, God's wrath poured out on the earth – and we are living in the days leading up to this time] – no wonder Jesus says “I wish it were already kindled” – he doesn't look forward to these days, and neither should we!

With that background in mind let's take a look at the passage from Hebrews, and see what we can learn about what it means to live in faith, and the cost of doing so.

We pick up the reading in the middle of a longer section in which the author is using the well known heroes of the old Testament to illustrate what faith is about – we read the first part last week. We pick up the story at the point where the Israelites are caught between a rock and a hard place – ahead lies the Red Sea, and coming up fast behind are the armies of

a very angry Pharaoh. Moses tells the people “The Lord will fight for you; you have only to be still”. So faith means trusting God to act, and to deliver on his promises.

We skip forward 40 years to Jericho – the stronghold of the Canaanite people. Here we find faith that isn’t daunted by the size or strength of the obstacle – faith quietly trusts as, for six days, the people simply march round the fortress in silence – seven times on the seventh day – until it was time to blow their trumpets.... And the city just fell!

We move on to Rahab – someone who certainly was no paragon of virtue – she was a prostitute and a traitor to her own people – but she had faith, faith that gave her a spirit willing to take amazing risks, concealing spies and then helping them to escape, faith that trusted that *their* God was supreme and would deliver her.

And by now the author is getting excited – he doesn’t have time to recount the stories, but he lists out Gideon – that’s Gideon who was famous for being frightened and demanding signs from God; and Barak, who was hesitant to obey; and Samson, who was flippant and boastful and ended up bringing the house down on his own head; and Jephthah who made a rash promise and ended up sacrificing his own daughter; even David whose lust led him to adultery and murder!

Clearly faith isn’t about being nice or good – Calvin says of this group: “There was none of them whose faith didn’t falter... In every saint there is always to be found something reprehensible. Nevertheless although faith may be imperfect and incomplete it does not cease to be approved by God. If we, who recognise our need for His help, will but seek God’s face we will not cry in vain. He delights in choosing those who seem most unsuitable and using those who seem the most rebellious.”

But there is another pitfall the author needs to warn us about. We might think from this list of examples that faith leads to heroism – after all these were famous people whose story had survived down the generations. Some of life’s situations are impossible to conquer or escape or become mighty and victorious. The powers are too great, the circumstances beyond our control. Then faith is the capability to accept suffering and adversity with serenity, endurance and trust. The author talks of those who have faced torture, mocking, chains and imprisonment. In Jesus we have his example on the road all the way to the cross.

Faith is not some abstract quality – it is the deep belief that God is who he says he is, that his actions in history, including sending Jesus as a man to die in our place, can be clearly seen and point to his character, and that the promises he has made to us are reliable and trustworthy.

What is it that enables us to believe this way? I would suggest that it is the absolute conviction that a better more permanent future awaits -that beyond death there lies the promise of a better kingdom – a life with our King! His return as Judge is not to be feared – it is a time of rejoicing that at last He has come, and justice will rule!

When we look at life in this world our faith may well cost us everything – it may well not be a comfortable walk by still waters – it may well be through the valley of death. But our faith lies in the promise embodied in Christ’s resurrection – He has come through death to establish a better place for us, he sends us his spirit to carry us through. We run the race

with perseverance not because we have some abstract sense that “perseverance is a good thing”, but because Jesus has told us to expect obstruction and troubles, and we have before us the prize of eternal life with him. “Jesus is the model and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of God!”

So, what might living with such faith, and running the race with perseverance, look like today?

Well the first thing I think is that it will be radical, and not ‘comfortable’. God’s standards are impossibly high, his justice immeasurably pure, and if we are living his way it is not going to sit comfortably in the world. In today’s world we try all the time to avoid causing offence, we have laws against it in various respects, we spend time teaching our children at school that we should embrace this and tolerate that. People who speak out against different ways of behaving are immediately branded “bigots”, and with that one word the world casts all that they stand for and believe to one side!

Historically, the word “bigot” was originally used by the French to mock the Normans who apparently used the Old English expression ‘by God’ so often that the French nicknamed them ‘bigots’. The dictionary tells me that a bigot is “a person who is utterly intolerant of any differing creed, belief, or opinion”. In the old Testament – how tolerant is God of other creeds, beliefs and so-called gods?? In the New Testament how many ways does Jesus tell us there are to the Father? So although the word today is used as a dismissive insult, for me as a Christian, it’s actually a compliment and a badge of honour!

Holding a pure and high view doesn’t make me holy, nor is it of itself a sign of faith – we need to remember what we have already heard that “In every saint there is always to be found something reprehensible”. Faith doesn’t make us proud or arrogant, it leads us to repentance – to coming before God in abject realisation that we are far from perfect, and then accepting through his grace the forgiveness for which Christ has paid the price – and only because the price has been paid, can we look forward to the time when we will be made perfect and live with him.

So radical faith leads us to call out God’s purity and holiness in the world, and to accept that as a result the world will reject us, and call us “bigots” or whatever, and in so doing actually bless us! Remember, every time the world acts this way it is God who is being rejected. God who has paid the price for us, and who will come as judge on those who reject him.

So when did we as a church last make a stand against the world’s values and culture? Do we have something to say to the community of Sandhurst that nationally now one in four pregnancies is ended by abortion? What does that say about our attitude to relationships, sex, and the creation of new life? Are we speaking up for the old disabled and infirm as our MP debates assisted dying? Are we speaking out about the ethics of artificial intelligence, transhumanism, the modification of DNA, the creation of completely new species blending human and animal genes?

Have you spoken to your MP, or joined an organisation challenging the world's view, or prayed for God to open up the channels for his word to be heard? Our words and our lives should be a challenge to the world around us!

I want to end with a bit of my personal story. I first became aware of true Christian faith at the age of 11 or 12. [I became really involved with my prep school Christian union – I was even given a nickname, “Zeal”, because of the way I was on fire for the Lord. My parents simply told me “not to be silly!”]

Then, at the tender age of thirteen I went off to Boarding school. Suddenly I was adrift in an alien world, and certainly not one that valued the word of the Lord. I wanted to live the way Jesus wanted]– I remember that one of my key verses and principles was “Render to no man evil for evil” .] I was bullied and pilloried. My determination not to hit back became to those around me a challenge – how far could they push me [– apple pie bed every night, my possessions regularly turned upside down – every day, every night, on and on and on.]

At first the idea that faith is costly gave me strength – but after four terms I cracked. First I told the Lord quite clearly that I could no longer bear it, and that I was going my own way – and then I turned on the ring-leader and in the space of two short weeks punched and arm-wrestled my way into the group – suddenly I was accepted – the bullying stopped – school became a place of fun, not of fear.

I'm not proud of this story, but I know it has shaped my life. It took the next 20 years for me to respond to the Lord's call that he still loved and valued me, and that he had not left my side even though I refused to acknowledge his presence. I once again took his hand and stepped out down the road with him at my side.

I still fear rejection and hurt when I try and speak in faith in non-Christian settings – there are echoes of both pain and failure that threaten to entangle me and hold me back – I'm only slowly learning to trust completely in the future, rather than look for comfort and safety in the present.

And yet, as I look at the scriptures for today I can see that Jesus told us to expect division and obstruction – he even warned me that my faith would set son against mother and father! The author of Hebrews showed us innumerable examples of flawed people who had, in spite of their weaknesses, lived as active examples of faith, not only through their good and heroic deeds, but also in the suffering and rejection they had faced. People who had learned to wear the rejection of the world as a badge of honour of their faith in Christ – a Christ who has paid the price for their sins and failures, who has called them to repentance, and in recognising their dependence on Him has given them the promise of eternal life with him.

So now, as we come to a couple of minutes of reflection on the cost of faith I'd ask you to take the picture and reflect on the question “What would you do?” – and let the Lord speak into your hearts.

[After 1 minute of silence: I want you to slightly change the question: “What will you do differently, this week?]



Coptic Christians in the hands of ISIS.