

Sunday 3rd November – Hebrews 11:1-16 ‘Faith for real life’

What is faith? It’s a fair question to ask – it’s a word that lies at the heart of what it means to follow Jesus, but so often it is parodied today as ‘the blind leading the blind’. Many compare ‘faith’ unfavourably to fact or reason, or dismiss it as a crutch for the weak. But this is not how the bible sees it. **Faith is something strong, active, dynamic** – in fact our text for today begins with this summary: ‘Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance in what we do not see.’ (v1)

I wonder if that’s how you see faith? Note the words used: confidence, assurance. Other translations use the words ‘sure’ and ‘certain’. Words we associate more with facts! And whilst we can’t ‘prove’ faith in the way that some would wish, what scripture consistently affirms is that we can rely on faith because: (a) we have good reasons to believe; (b) we have our own experiences and convictions which we know we can’t deny; and (c) we have the examples of others to inspire us.

And in Hebrews 11, the author brings together many of these inspiring examples in one extraordinary narrative – this is *the* faith chapter of the bible: it’s the 1st-century equivalent of a coach’s pep talk. ‘Look at these people,’ the author says, ‘if they can do it, so can you. So keep going!’

And this list of inspirational figures begins at an unexpected place. If I were to ask you who the first hero of the bible is, I bet most of you would say Noah. But Hebrews gives us two heroes before that, and the very first is: Abel, brother of Cain (his story is in Genesis 4). Most of us simply think of Abel as the first murder victim of history, but what this passage does is remind us *why* that happened.

Abel gave God his best – the *first-fruits* of his flock. That is what put him at odds with his brother, but it is also why he is a hero of the faith. Despite what happened to his parents, Abel knew that God deserved his worship, and so he gave God something precious – which in turn showed that his heart was fully given to God. So, **the first thing we learn about faith is that faith gives God its best.**

Faith is sometimes caricatured as a free pass – but nothing could be further from the truth. Yes, faith is always our bedrock – but to live out our faith means to live with gratitude, and therefore to give of our best to God. It is easy to get weary of doing good – but may Abel inspire us, and indeed **Enoch, the second hero, whose name means ‘dedicated’**, who is one of only a handful of people taken to be directly with God, and who lived for 365 years and yet remained faithful – I guess he didn’t get weary of doing good! How can you give God your best today?

Second, faith obeys God in all circumstances. I wonder if you’ve watched the film ‘Evan Almighty’ – apart from being very funny, the value of watching the film is that it is a modern-day re-telling of the story of Noah. It visualises what it would actually be like to receive the sort of message Noah had from God, and to actually build an enormous boat in your garden while everyone around you pointed and laughed. Like Chicken Licken in the child’s story, I wonder how many of us would have passed Noah’s home and believed that the sky really was about to fall down?

It’s easy to romanticise Noah’s story (Genesis 6-9), but the reality was hard. Noah was given an incredible task, which required unusual faith to obey. Indeed, today’s passage soberingly reminds us that Noah’s faith did not just save him and his family but also condemned the world (v7). Not that this was Noah’s fault, but the stakes were high – and we know that at the end of the story God gives Noah assurance that he would never have to ‘start again’ with humanity in the future: the rainbow would be a sign of blessing, to remind us of this promise. This remains true today – every time we see a rainbow, God promises to remember – and so, we too can give thanks that the Lord remembers us.

Noah teaches us that faith obeys God in all circumstances: much of the time that will be reasonable, but there will be times when God asks us to do something unusual. It is wise to check with trusted friends and companions, and to seek assurance in prayer –but we should not rule out such prompts. We are all heirs of ‘the righteousness that it is in keeping with faith.’ Where is God calling you to exercise obedient faith at the moment?

Third, faith trusts God's promises. And here, we navigate better-known waters – the famous story of Abraham (Genesis 12 onwards). Like Noah, Abraham was called to step out in faith. Unlike Noah, the greatest promise of God was one for which Abraham had to wait much longer to be fulfilled. God first promised Abraham that he and Sarah would have a child when he was 75 – it was finally fulfilled 25 years later, when Abraham turned 100.

Abraham's journey was somewhat chequered, and not without its failings. But the extraordinary faith he showed when leaving his homeland to head to the land to which God had called him (v8) and then to settle there (v9) proved a sure testing ground for the promises to come. Indeed, he shared that faith with Sarah, who quite rightly gets equal billing in this text in trusting God for the family she was promised (v11).

We are the heirs of this promise – indeed all of us who worship our Lord are beneficiaries, a global movement 'as numerous as the stars in the sky and countless as the sand on the seashore.' (v12)

Not many of us have likely been given promises as huge as Abraham and Sarah. But **most of us carry smaller promises, special to us** – and sometimes those promises take time to be fulfilled. Abraham and Sarah's story gives us faith and hope to believe that God will come through for us – even a mustard seed of that faith is enough.

Then there are God's universal promises, the truths we find in scripture, the eternal realities of our faith. The blessings promised to Abraham are ours: God has given them to us in Christ (Ephesians 1:3-14). These promises have already been fulfilled – by faith we receive them and join God's global family – both in this life, as well as in the one to come.

May God give us grace to trust his promises – for (as we looked at last week, and it's a theme the author of Hebrews comes back to again and again) the one who promises them is faithful!

Finally, faith waits in hope. This Friday (1st November) was All Saints' Day: traditionally the day of the year when we celebrate the worldwide church, living and departed: the 'cloud of witnesses' who have lived by faith and borne testimony to their Lord in every culture throughout the centuries.

Some of them are famous, and rightly so. The vast majority are not: people just like us, who lived quietly faithful lives. All of them – and us – are saved by the grace of God, since none of us ever achieve perfection this side of heaven. There will be parts of our lives that remain 'works in progress', and certainly the societies in which we live will never be more than a partial reflection of the true kingdom of God.

Similarly, the author concludes today's passage by reminding us that, however much they achieved, (v13) 'all these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance.'

Like us, these saints saw only a partial realisation of all that they lived and prayed and longed for. Noah and his family were saved, but Noah had to trust the future of the human race into divine hands when he died. Abraham and Sarah were blessed with a son, but had to trust that this son would indeed be the 'child of promise'. We know there were plenty of bumps along the way after that!

The author summarises by reminding us that to live by faith means to live as 'foreigners and strangers on earth' (v13). It's not that we cut ourselves off from society: but there will always be a part of us that has a different home: (v16) 'a better country – a heavenly one.'

And it is this country we long for. This is the worthy goal of our faith. For all the blessings we receive in this life, followers of Jesus remain strangers on this earth. Faith is not pie in the sky when we die – but **being confident of our future does give us hope for the present.** This kind of faith enables us to keep giving our best, to obey God in all circumstances, to trust God's promises, and to wait in hope. May God grant us all grace to live with this kind of faith – today, this week, always. Amen.