

Sermon – Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16, Luke 12.32-40

9th Sunday after Pentecost

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. **Amen.**

Good morning! It's a pleasure to be here, preaching to you again after a July that was so rich in variety and wisdom, drawn from our many mission partners. And if I was to try and discern some commonality among them, it must surely be that they all had a deep and profound faith, a faith that stirred them to action, whether, like Chris and Naomi, it was taking their family overseas to live far away in a different culture, demonstrating the love of God to the neighbours around them, or Rob who every week ministers inside the walls of prisons in Victoria, or Hayley, evangelizing to students at university about the good news of Jesus' love for us and God's saving grace.

And faith of course is what brings us all here to worship on a Sunday. Our faith in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is what defines us as a community. Here in Lara (Little River) the name of our church Holy Trinity (Christ Church) even identifies our faith. So today it seemed timely to preach on our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews which starts out with that well known definition of faith as the "assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen". This morning I want to delve into the meaning of faith, what it is, where it takes us, and as a community, how do we live out our faith and let the people around us know about the indwelling love of God which nurtures our lives, our relationships and our very beings. But first let's have a little background on the Letter to the Hebrews.

The Letter to the Hebrews is probably less recognized than others in New Testament writings. Both its author and its specific audience are unknown but it is clear that the writer is sending encouragement to a community in difficult times. The content, written in sermon style over 13 chapters, is predominantly about the identity of Jesus Christ who is, from verse 3 of the opening chapter, “the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.” Last year we heard excerpts from chapters 1 to 7 over 4 weeks around October. This year we have three weeks of Hebrews taken from chapters 11 and 12. These are the climactic chapters of the letter in which the author moves from the Christological, or focus on Jesus, to action.

Some writers consider this chapter a “rhetorical masterpiece” that speaks directly to the modern reader through the force of the cumulative testimony of witnesses from the beginning of history. If you read the entire chapter, not just the pieces that we have today, you will see reflections of faith from Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses and more. Today’s reading takes in the opening definition of faith and then the example of Abraham. Let’s have a closer look.

Well, the opening statement, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” is probably the best-known quote from Hebrews. It is a poetic opening, a couplet of statements using contrasting phrases to describe faith.

In the first couplet, faith is the assurance of things hoped for. What is the assurance of things? Well, my online thesaurus helpfully furnished me with multiple meanings of the word assurance: pledge, guarantee, oath, promise. It’s a very concrete word isn’t it? And this very concreteness contrasts with “things hoped for”. What is it that we hope for? What is it that

we in our humanity long for? Perhaps it's peace in our hearts, perhaps it's love in our lives, perhaps it's a sense of meaning and purpose, that life isn't just a senseless, random chain of events, perhaps it's forgiveness for things buried deep in our souls, things that we can't work out on our own. So perhaps faith is wrapped up in the promise of love, the promise of peace, the promise of meaning and purpose, the promise of forgiveness. God's grace poured out upon us.

And then the writer presents their next couplet. Faith is the conviction of things not seen. It's a repetitious couplet with a twist, isn't it? And in biblical writing, repetition usually means that something is important. Where assurance is a word attributed to someone or something else, someone else is promising love, peace, forgiveness, meaning, conviction is about our own attitude, isn't it? Our own belief in things not seen. Conviction seems to me to be another concrete word, a certain word, our concrete belief in things not seen. A belief in the creator God, in the kingdom of heaven, as they play out in our lives in the here and now.

And this opening verse defining faith, in context with the whole letter, sets the chapter up as being all about the human response to the divine revelation, that is, that Jesus Christ is "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word".

And the writer goes onto introduce their primary method of argument for this chapter by saying in verse 2 Indeed by faith our ancestors received approval. And indeed examples of ancestors are given for the duration of the chapter.

And in verse 3 the writer says "By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible". The writer brings the great creator God into the

argument, going right back to Genesis when God created the heavens and the earth out of a formless void, and spoke into it, “Let there be light”. Even the mystery of creation is to be understood in terms of faith.

So our reading today skips over verses of ancient, faithful, biblical characters to the example of Abraham in verse 8 which says: “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.”

So here we have the example of faith being the conviction of things not seen. Abraham acts with faith, with conviction, when he obeys God’s call to go to another country, not knowing where he was going or where he would end up. Abraham acted on something unseen and unknown and took his wife and his possessions away from his homeland home to a place far away, stepping out in faith. I wonder how many of us step out in faith, not knowing what is around the corner, what or where God is calling us to next?

Well this week I have been on retreat at Santa Casa in Queenscliff, and in their grounds they have a labyrinth, the photo you see on our pew sheet. The labyrinth seems to me to be a great metaphor for faith. As you walk this labyrinth, you don’t know where you are going, the path twists back on itself countless times and you don’t really know where you are going to end up until suddenly you find yourself in the centre. It’s a great metaphor for faith, for life, for journey. And it’s only really with trust and hope that we can find ourselves in to the centre, to our hoped for destination, perhaps a little worn from life’s twists and turns, but intact with the peace and love of God

in our hearts, knowing that God has journeyed with us through the complexities and travails of life.

Because remember, God promises those things hoped for. This assurance, this promise comes through in the story of Abraham. In verse 9 “By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised.” And in verse 11, “By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised.”

The writer of Hebrews talks not just about the conviction and faith of Abraham and his response to God’s call. He talks about God’s promise of not just a temporal home for Abraham and his family, but also a heavenly home. In verse 16, the writer says “But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.” God promises to prepare a place for us all, for us who have faith, who have conviction, who are not ashamed to call our God.

And this last verse of Hebrews seems to dovetail very neatly into the first verse of our Gospel reading from Luke. ‘Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.’ This sounds like another assurance to me. And Jesus is quick to say how we are to respond.

“Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Jesus says where our treasure is, our heart will be also. It is a promise and a warning isn't it? And the rest of the reading goes into warning mode doesn't it? So, how are we going to make treasure in heaven? Where is our faith, our conviction, going to lead us, both as individuals and as a community? How are we going to act on God's promises? These are good questions to ask ourselves as individuals, and they're also good questions to ask ourselves as a community.

Over the next few months, we as a community will develop a Mission Action Plan, a plan which will help take us into the next three years of ministry and mission here in Lara and Little River. Are you going to be part of creating this plan? Are you going to be part making this plan happen? My invitation to you is to come on board and be part of planning our mission here in this place. Let it be a reflection of your faith, your action, and your response to God's call on your life.

Let me pray.

Loving and awesome Creator God,

We give you thanks for your message today about faith. That you promise to be a God who provides the kingdom for us. That you pour your Spirit into our hearts, giving us love, peace and grace. We pray that we can respond to you with love and conviction. That we can understand how we can make a difference to the lives of people here in Lara and Little River, how we can show the difference you make in our lives to those around us. We pray this in the name of Jesus, the reflection of your glory and the imprint of your very being, Amen.