

Pentecost 12 – St Aidan’s Uniting – 11th August 2013

Theme: “Faith and hope”

Reading: Hebrews 11: 1-3 & 8-16

Text: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”
Hebrews 11:1

Introduction

The eleventh chapter of Hebrews is like a roll call of many of the memorable Old Testament people of faith. Some stories we know well – others we struggle to remember. However the Jewish people would have known all these stories far better than we do. The ‘honour roll’ is a little ‘lopsided’ with only two women named. Sarah, the wife of Abraham, and Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho (the story is found in Joshua chapter 2, if you wish to read it) who harboured the Israelite spies. However, in spite of the emphasis on men, this roll call is an impressive one even for us who come mostly from a Christian perspective rather than a Jewish one.

But then comes the unexpected phrase in Hebrews 11:13 –

“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.”

What a way to ruin a good story. In spite of their mighty faith they perished like the rest of us. Death, that indiscriminate leveller, got all of them in the end.

However, in the New Testament we are dealing with a different way of seeing life and death. A different view of time and eternity. From the Christian perspective, faith is not shattered by death. In truth, death is shattered by hope and faith. To live by hope and faith and to die in hope and faith, is a grand thing.

What is this hope?

What is this hope which when taken up by faith reshapes remarkable persons and also shatters the gloom of death?

According to the letter to the Hebrews, faith is closely allied to hope.

In Hebrews 10: 22-23 we read:

“..let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised it is faithful.”

Christian hope is not a wistful longing or a pathetic wish-list for the improbable or the impossible. Hope is not building imaginary castles in the air. It is not trite, sentimental optimism. It is sharing God’s vision and plan. Hope is affirming the glorious future which God has for humanity.

- Hope for that childless couple, Abraham and Sarah, was daring to envision the Divine promise that through their descendants ‘all the families of the earth shall be blessed’
- Hope for Moses was daring to picture and commit to the liberty of the promised land ‘flowing with milk and honey’ at a time when his people were in miserable slavery in Egypt
- Hope for Isaiah was a commitment to the vision of daring to see and preach the new world order that one day would surely come to be:

'Then shall blind eyes be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap like a deer and the tongue of the dumb, sing. Men shall not lift up sword against nation, nor ever again be trained for war. For the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the seas.' We are still awaiting the fulfilment of this vision!!

- For the Christian, hope takes on a special shape. It dares to look at a new world order shaped in the likeness of Jesus of Nazareth. He is the first born to shape a new humanity. Jesus is the new creation, the future surging into the present moment. By hope we commit ourselves to doing things his way. Hope is daring to look at this future, seeing it not as a mirage but as a certainty. Hope is sometimes a struggle as we see church numbers decline, wars continuing, the strong appearing to control society and non-Christian actions dominant. But scripture teaches us to 'to dare to hope'!

What about faith?

A clarification of the word 'faith' in Hebrews is needed. Here it is not 'saving faith' as in Paul's letters to the Romans and the Galatians. Rather it is more the results of having been 'saved by faith' – it is faith 'on the go', launching out and implementing what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. It is the 'lived out faith' which is activity based.

In a sense it is what causes us to have compassion and a social conscience which means that at the moment many Christians are speaking out against the policy of offshore processing of asylum seekers/refugees as being inhumane, both to those individuals but also imposing these people on smaller Pacific island countries that really cannot cope with the influx.

Faith in action is dynamic, confrontative, God centred, accepting of God's direction despite not fully understanding where it may lead.

We tend to forget that Abraham was a 'sojourner' with no home country. Moses looked forward to a country to call 'home'. The faith heroes lived in many places, settled in foreign cultures, were known as 'aliens', temporary residents awaiting a final home. Little different to our asylum seekers/refugees. Little different to most of our backgrounds in this country – either transported to this land or come seeking a better life for self and families. Suddenly this passage comes alive for us today as we progress towards an election on the 7th September with both major parties supporting offshore processing of asylum seekers/refugees. Into this, where is our living faith and our hope for a wonderful country, based on our Christian convictions!!

Conclusion

"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see"

Hebrews 11:1

We will live and die in the faith with many of our God-given hopes not fully realised. But it is far, far better to die with the restlessness of hope still upon us, than to die as those content with this world as it is now.

It is good to see faith in action and hopes fulfilled by the heroes of the Old Testament and to see that their faith brought them hope, often unrealised, until long after their deaths.

This didn't stop them believing, acting and having hope in the future.

May we take strength through this passage and have faith in our God who is active in this world, through the hopeful, faithful people of each generation.

Amen!