

11 August 2019

Gen 15: 1-6; Heb 11: 1-3, 8-16; Luke 12: 32-40

Faith: fact of fiction?

We were at Lanchester garden centre with our grandson, and as we paused outside for an ice cream, we saw a group of children arriving for a birthday party. It was clearly a *Superheroes* party! We saw the Incredible Hulk, Superman, Batman and, evidently most popular just now, *three* Captain Americas, each proudly brandishing a shield.

I'm sure you all know that this shield is emblazoned with a huge star and stripes all round its rim, so we can be in no doubt to whom it belongs. The shield is both indestructible and throwable, like a missile, a kind of giant, deadly frisbee. The shield is both defensive and offensive. Please remember this.

A **shield** is mentioned twice in our readings today: in Psalm 33: *our soul waits for the Lord, he is our help and our shield.*

In Genesis 15, God tells Abram: *Do not be afraid, I am your shield, your reward will be very great.*

And if we look up references to shields in the Bible they are numerous, so I will mention only one more: when describing the armour of God in Ephesians chapter 6, St Paul says: *Take the shield of faith ...*

As Abram, later to be Abraham, takes hold of God's promise and puts his trust in the Lord, his faith is like taking up a shield.

There is a huge gulf between this Biblical picture of **faith** and the way the word is used currently. So much so that my title today is **Faith: Fact or Fiction?**

In our society, faith is portrayed as personal and private, irrational, a crutch and slightly weird. Sorry, but it's true! For those who have not experienced Christian worship, fellowship or prayer – and who may have no understanding of what those churchy words even mean- faith is at best a lifestyle choice and at worst a dangerous delusion.

That's why some convinced humanists in Oxfordshire are challenging the assemblies at their child's state primary school and asking for a judicial review. The local church has been supporting the school to deliver the legal requirement of 'broadly Christian collective worship' and, I suspect, done it well enough for the child to go home talking about Bible stories and being alarmingly enthusiastic. It will be interesting to see what the Review says, but it is an indication of where we are in our view of the place of faith in everyday life, when it dares to step outside the personal and private domain...

I want to focus today on our reading from Hebrews, the most famous passage in this letter, with good reason. As a young Christian I memorised verse 1, I took note of verse 2, but I never really thought about verse 3, but it is verse 3 on which we will concentrate.

Heb 11 v 1 says *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*

There is so much encouragement in this, it's a heart and soul, mind and spirit verse, which helps us grasp that we dealing with things beyond the seen, known and understood.

As I've met challenges, uncertainties, big decisions, this verse has helped me again and again. I suspect I'm not alone in this? On to verse 2: *Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval* here my knowledge of Christian doctrine kicked in, telling me that, in the time before Christ, heroes of faith were justified and saved not through Christ's death and resurrection, but by trusting in God's promises to them. I didn't memorise this verse, but I got its message and moved swiftly on in the chapter to all the examples of heroes of faith. Had we read vv 4-7 this morning, we would have heard about Abel, Enoch and Noah, but our reading took us straight to v 8 and the greatest of the heroes, Abraham.

Now you will realise that I have just skipped over verse 3.

And I confess that it was only as I prepared this sermon that I paused to consider and reflect on it, helped by a trusty commentary or two, and got very excited! Here it is, Hebrews 11 v3: *By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so what is seen was made from things that are not seen.*

The writer chooses, before citing any examples of human faith, to say that the primary effect of faith is that we can understand the word of God! The word of God which brought the whole created order into being, speaking into the dark void and saying 'Let there be light'. The word of God envisaging what was to be, in all its majesty and fragility, and creating it.

In 'The Magician's Nephew', CS Lewis' pre-quel to *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the great lion Aslan sings the creation into being, with music from the depth of his being and from before time began. Lewis's faith enabled him to understand and imaginatively articulate the truth of the word of God in creation, just

like verse 3 says. *By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so what is seen was made from things that are not seen.*

So the word of God, creating, is our model for what faith is.

God speaks and it is done; we hear and believe God's word and what has not yet come into being happens, becomes real. Thus we are partners with God in creation.

We often think of 'creation' as a long ago, once for all at by which the world was made, as if God has not created anything since but rested on a cloud stroking his long white beard!

But God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is always creating, always making things new, from each new dawn to every seed that grows, every friendship that blossoms, every heart that is mended, every child who is born.

Abraham and Sarah became partners with God in creation as they trusted in his promise not only of a son but of a dynasty and a nation. Their advanced age made it abundantly clear that this was all God's doing. They waited for many years for God's promise to be fulfilled, but they never let go of it.

And as people of faith, we are in the creation business.

I spoke to you some weeks ago about a couple who, having sensed or heard God's word, set up a beach mission on a Scottish island. Faith in action: *faith which is fact, not fiction.*

Recently I read of the work of Beachy Head Chaplains, working at the no 1. suicide spot in the UK, where 520 people per year go with the intention of jumping from the cliffs. This chaplaincy began in response to a vision from God – a promise- and the

person who received this vision acted upon it, working with local police, hospitals and other services so that the Chaplaincy team is now making a huge difference, holding out light and hope to those in desperate need. God is always making things new and this is *Faith which is fact, not fiction*. The reducing suicide statistics prove it!

You will know of other situations, which are less dramatic.

But whenever we choose to obey God's word, whenever choose life and love, we are acting in faith. When we allow the inner voice of God to direct us, to visit someone who is isolated, to buy for the foodbank during our weekly shop, to phone a relative who is estranged, to volunteer our time, we are acting in faith. *Faith which is fact, not fiction*.

And whenever we use our God-given creativity and imagination to embrace God's preferred and promised future, we are acting in faith. That's all from verse 3.

But I want to return to the famous first verse of this passage, in the light of what we've been thinking about.

...faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

I have often read this as a personal, private *assurance* and *conviction*- echoing, I guess, our modern sense of faith as a personal and private thing. But it turns out, with the help of Greek scholars, that the words have far greater meaning than that. The word translated 'assurance' means foundation, substance, evidence: not just a gut feeling but something on which to build and act. Much more objective, not simply subjective.

And the word translated 'conviction', which can be thought of as a subjective, personal choice to believe something, in Greek describes a process of coming into

being, becoming real... in the form used here, it also has a sense of past, present and future... For subjective 'conviction' we should perhaps read objective' realization' of things not seen.

At the Proms, a commentator might say- 'that was a perfect realization of Bartok's symphony' meaning that the notes on the page have become live music – and many of you will be remembering now Mike's talk a few months ago about Jesus' music: Jesus, the word of God in human form, making God real, love real, life real. That is *Faith which is fact, not fiction.*

In closing, I'd like to return to Captain America's shield- you'll have remembered that it is both defensive and offensive.

So too our faith: it *defends* our hearts and minds, protects us as we hold on to God's personal and loving promises to us.

But it's also *offensive*, fighting against the destruction and degradation of this world, of people, of the earth.

In the classic modern hymn *The Servant King*, one of the most haunting lines is this *Hands that flung stars into space, to cruel nails surrendered.*

Jesus Christ who shared in the creation of the world, willingly gave up his life to break the power of death and destruction once and for all. What if now, as we partner with God through faith, he wants us to throw our shields as if we are throwing stars into space, to bring new light, new hope, and new glory to God?

So this is our faith, which is not personal delusion or fiction, but fact, lived reality, full of promise for today and for our eternal future with our loving creator God.

Amen.

