

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost 2019

Most of us, if we are honest, are sometimes troubled about the question of faith. I often think of myself as mere beachcomber at the edge of the sea of faith, looking for hints and clues washed up. Often we speak quite easily, glibly even about the 'community of faith', or 'people of faith' and the scriptures speak about faith in many different ways; but I think that faith is more difficult than some folk would have us believe. When we say the creed we use the word *Credo*, which we translate I believe, or we believe. I read that *Credo* means 'I give my allegiance to' and so in the creed we give our allegiance to God, in Christ, through the Spirit. But I wonder if this is often intellectual assent, what of faith?

When all is said and done today's readings are about faith; and for us, standing in this religious tradition it began with that text we heard this morning. Abram's position seems to all intents and purposes, in human terms, hopeless; in an age when progeny is everything, he has no future. God calls him outside asks him to look into the night sky and believe. *And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.* God doesn't give Abram much to go on. You'd have thought he could have shown him the heavenly host, like a baroque ceiling! But he asks him to look into the darkness, I wonder if this is a clue. For us urbanites the night sky is often muted because of pollution, light and otherwise. But when we escape to the bush the sky becomes a light show of suns, and planets, the Milky Way and all the wonders of the universe; it's fabulous! But there are times when the awe that I feel is tinged with a certain fear, a certain insecurity that comes with feeling rather small and insignificant in the vastness of the cosmos. I guess you'd call it an existential crisis! And I wonder of this is what God did to Abram and I wonder if *real* faith is born at those moments when we feel most insignificant. How do we then introduce others into this world that we call faith? There is a venerable tradition in the Church to describe things by what they are not and it seemed to me a good way to deal with faith!

We need to say first that faith *is not* a private matter! It is not something that you or I own, neither is it a badge that we wear. It is said that the Reformation led to the catastrophic idea that faith is personal, that it entails no public commitment; it becomes a kind of fire insurance for the afterlife. Bonhoeffer said such faith is 'salvation egoism' relying on 'cheap grace'. Faith by its nature will always spill out, ultimately with social and political impact.

Faith *is not* about material things; our gospel reading this morning opened with comforting words from Jesus: 'Do not be afraid, little

flock,...' He has just been speaking of the anxiety of a world consumed by the material. It is a message we need to hear today. Not that the material is all bad, but it becomes so when it is competitive, grasping, greedy, we heard about that last week. So, yes, a certain kind of materialism is the opposite of faith, our faith is not about the car we drive or the house we live in!

Apparently over 365 times scripture counsels us: "Do not be afraid!" If ever a Biblical word was ignored surely this is it, and the church is front and centre! Fundamentalist folk are afraid of scholarship and science. Traditionalists are afraid of change and newness. Some are fearful of an increasingly irreligious world, others by a world that is too religious! And a lot of Christians are seeking safety by demanding their rights, their freedom. It's all very unseemly, it's unchristian. Fear makes us act in these faithless ways, makes us shrink, and turns us in ourselves. But faith – real faith – expands us, turns us outwards to others, lays out the welcome mat to the different and strange and tries to engage even the enemy. Not easy; but who said that faith is easy. So, yes, a certain kind of fear is the opposite of faith, the kind that makes us inward looking.

Tennyson wrote 'There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.' Whilst James warns against doubt, it is certainty that is the opposite of faith, the thinking in the Church that says 'I am right, I am certain' is problematic. So perhaps rather than being certain we need to be assured. It is by *assurance* that we can say some positive things about faith. This is the thinking of the writer to the letter to the Hebrews, who told us morning '...faith is the *assurance* of things *hoped for*, the conviction of things not seen.' Faith in this context is not something that we have, or don't have, but the assurance of something over the horizon, something that calls us, draws us along, something that we hope for but have not yet seen.

It is the faith we glimpse in Abraham and Sarah, in Mary and Joseph, it is all about what is beyond the horizon of the humanly possible. It is the journey of life in which we take in the most unexpected and least likely way and sometimes, in human terms, the least prudent or reasonable way. Faith is also not static, it is not something we can cling to, or hide in! When we journey 'in faith' on this pilgrimage of life, we sit lightly with our material possessions, we are not fearful of other folk and other ways of thinking, but open to them; we are careful about our certainties, dare I say that we are even agnostic to some degree. We don't possess faith, it possesses us, it is the power of the crucified and risen Jesus drawing us on, drawing us toward himself and that city prepared for us. This is faith. Amen.