

Faith

St Philips' Anglican Church, O' Connor

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B—18 August 2024

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Today I'm speaking on faith, not to the gospel reading or any of the readings. It's designed to give you an insight into my personal journey so that you might get to know this strange person up front.

I once heard an appealing analogy for the faith experience. It seems that a little girl was flying a kite high up in the sky. Soon a low flying cloud encircled the kite and hid it from view. A man passing by asked the little girl what she was doing with the string in her hand. "Flying my kite", the child responded. The man looked up at the sky and saw only the cloud in an otherwise clear sky. "I don't see a kite up there. How can you be sure there's a kite up there?" The child replied, "I don't see it either, but I know my kite's up there because, every once in a while, there's a little tug on the string."

In the same sense, I know that there is a guiding hand in mine as I proceed along the pathways of my life. I know that there's a light, not mine, that shows me the way I am to go, one step at a time.

Faith is grasping the unseen and that's why some of us find it so difficult to accept because we live in a society where if you can't feel it, smell it or see it, it's not real. Like the man who was walking along the edge of a cliff when suddenly a large gust of wind blew him over the edge. About twenty feet down, he grabbed a small protruding shrub. He hung on desperately for a while and then shouted,

"Help, is anybody there?"

"Yes."

"Who are you?"

"God."

"Oh good."

"Do you believe in God?"

"Oh, yes, yes."

"Do you have faith in me?"

"Oh yes, yes."

"Let go."

"Is anybody else there?"

Now, as we're told in scriptures, "God first loved us" and "I have chosen you". This is a choosing of us, a call to friendship with the God of all creation. But as with many offers, they're not always accepted. And what's the greatest mystery is that, while God makes this offer, he does not force us to accept it. He patiently awaits our response.

Perhaps there are some here this morning wanting to have faith in Christ or perhaps wanting it rekindled. But there is something which holds you back from taking that last step and flinging open the door of your heart in faith. But if you do, do you have faith that God will not let you down? For us to be able to break with the past and have faith to effect changes in our lives seems often impossible. But that is only viewing it from our own weak human perspective. We are looking at our own situation without the grace and power of God. But with faith in the power of God, all our protestations of weakness or fear can be overcome. — Those thoughts like, "Lord, I've tried to live as a Christian before and I've been able to keep going for a fortnight, but something always overtakes me, and I fall by the wayside." Or

“Lord, if I started to live more by my faith, my husband or my family wouldn’t understand me.”

Those negative thoughts don’t concern us when we step out in faith. Faith enables us to make decisions with certainty. Faith gives us a real capacity to achieve great things to overcome ourselves and our fears. There is no need to be afraid once we count on Christ, since we are no longer dependent on our own efforts, which are always limited, but on the almighty strength of God. So, how does God enable us? Firstly, he gives us his light to see our horizons with new eyes, to see our plans from different perspectives, and he calls us to recognise new values to which we had given little or no importance before.

From my own life, I see all three of these points in my lead up to offering myself for training for the ordained ministry. When I was fourteen, people of my parish would tell me regularly, “You will end up in the ministry.” Sounds a bit like a crocodile. My internal response was always, “Not b— likely.”

It seemed odd that I confronted Bishop Clive at the age of 18 to offer myself for training for the Bush Church Aid Society. He suggested that in view of my tender years, I should go away and think about it. And being such a fast thinker, I went away and thought about it for nearly 20 years. I have a PhD from the ANU in procrastination. I viewed life then as success or achievement oriented: general manager of a large provincial building society, now a bank. Paid three times more than I was worth. (Actually, for the purpose of this sermon, I looked up the computer to see what the current value of my final salary was. I was being paid \$292,000. That’s what it was worth back then and all it’s worth now. I was also insured for \$10 million for key man insurance. How much am I insured for here? Nothing.) Mercedes Benz supplier, nice house, farm out of town, always working and scheming towards getting a bigger one. Magnificent wife, three beautiful daughters, social prestige, actively involved in local church affairs.

Then God spun me around to show me that all my material possessions didn’t add up to a row of beans. When I came to college, I was amazed at my reaction. The selling of the farm and everything I’d worked so hard for didn’t bother me, although I did miss my horses.

In addition to light, God offers us his strength to strengthen our vision of reality so that we can carry out our decisions. From Philippians 4, verse 13, all things are possible for me. In him who gives me strength, we are able to respond to our ministries. This enabling becomes necessary for our growth. When we look at ourselves, we see all of our weaknesses and without the light of God, we don’t know we can change. Without faith in his strength, we won’t get very far.

We hear the words of Christ addressed to us from John, chapter 15, verse 5. “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit. Apart from me, you can do nothing.” None of us, unless we are part of that vine, can continue to grow in faith. We need the strength of the sap of life flowing in us, the sap of life which God gives us. God is always true to his word when we accept it in faith.

I find that faith to be the only way I can operate. As 2 Corinthians chapter 12 tells us, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness. I accept that in faith and that is what empowers me for ministry. I daily acknowledge before God that there is nothing I can do in my own power, but in faith only can I satisfy the demands of ministry by accepting that God’s grace is sufficient for me. God called me to offer myself for training for ministry at the age of 39. Why he’d call a person like me with a decided lack of academic ability and inclination and inarticulate, I’ll never know.

All I know is that God called me and in faith I responded. I didn't know where he was leading me, but in faith I responded. I know he'll never put me in a situation where he won't supply me with the gifts required to exercise his ministry. Since ordination I've been involved in ministry situations which I could never have contemplated in years past. I would have fled in fear. But in faith I believe God uses me as a channel for bringing healing and reconciliation.

Again, I stress that I do nothing in my own power. When I pray for or with people, I expect something to happen every time. Something always happens when we pray in faith. Occasionally God doesn't answer as we would like, which tends to make us rethink our faith. Like when I did my Old Testament exam in first year at college, the prayers for success were never more eloquent and heartfelt that morning. "Now we're not going to let each other down, are we Lord?" It was my last prayer as I left the college chapel to go to the exam room.

But because I didn't know my Old Testament subject, guess what the result was? It was with great consternation that I was to later learn that the big F on the result sheet did not stand for "fantastic" but did indeed stand for "fail". I carried the subject into second year, and it was my top mark. And this remarkable result was only achieved through many hours of sleepless nights, much diligence, prayer, application of wet towels to a fevered brow and a small Johnny Walker occasionally. Well at least my prayer was a bit different to another student who prayed, "Listen Lord, if you're really coming back, do it before two o'clock to save me from all of this."

I waged a 20-year fight against offering myself for training for the ordained ministry. It was out on the back lawn at Bishopthorpe that the final battle occurred in 1982. Bishopthorpe, some would recall, was the diocesan conference centre in Goulburn, which has since been sold. I sat there with five questions on my mind, which were the last obstacles to be removed by God. I allowed about an hour for the final battle. The answers came to me not in an audible voice, but as real as, as God spoke directly to my heart.

"Lord, you know I'm not academically gifted."

"I will be with you in all your studies, and you will complete college."

"Lord, what about the disruption to my children's schooling?"

"You will be doing what I require of you. Their schooling will be taken care of."

"Lord, what happens if I go to a parish and they don't like us and we have constant conflict?" "So, I will be with you."

"But, Lord, Sylvia and I hated living in Canberra when we lived in 1970. I'm really a country boy."

People require ministry wherever they are, and I will use you wherever I want to use you."

"Lord, how do we keep ourselves in the manner in which we've grown accustomed to the next three years?"

"I will be with you in the practical issues as well."

I told Sylvia when she came to pick me up later that evening and her response was, "Thank God I've been watching you going slowly mad for the last five years." So, if you think I've got a few kangaroos hopping around in the top paddock now, you should have seen me then.

The big "one-hour battle" took five minutes. Matthew chapter 7.7-8 provides the key as to the source of our faith. Prayer is the key to our faith.

"Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. They who seek, find. And to those who knock, the door will be opened."

You see, you can't pray if you don't have faith, and you can't have faith if you don't pray. Faith is not mere intellectual assent to the truth, but our faith must yield the appropriate fruit and be exercised. You see, we can't trade forever on the faith of Grandma or St Ethelburga.

Sooner or later, we need to make our faith our own. Like the little girl, you may not be able to see the kite. But hold firmly onto the string, because every once in a while, there's a little tug on that string and you know your faith is for real.