

## **Faith matters.**

Faith is something we talk a lot about in church. Or at least it's a word we use a lot – we talk about having faith, about being faithful, about God's faithfulness to us, and so on.

Faith, we know, is good stuff. We should have it. We should build it up. But how do we get faith? And what does it really look like when we have it?

Webster's dictionary defines faith as a belief in something for which there is no proof. But I don't think that's particularly helpful, because it can leave us wondering what 'belief' is. Is belief the same as faith?

In our modern world, faith often refers to a belief in something more than the physical world – people will refer to others as being of the Christian faith, or the Moslem faith, or the Hindu faith.

And faith can extend beyond the religious too. When our church roof was being replaced, the building was scaffolded, and I took the opportunity to climb up to the top of the scaffolding and have a look around. Someone asked me if I felt scared when I did that. "No, not scared," I said, "I have faith in the scaffolders."

I think that shows the difference between faith and belief. I didn't check every scaffolding joint for myself, but I believed that they'd done a good job, and on the basis of that belief, I did something.

It's the same when we talk about faith in God and faith Jesus. Our faith is more than just believing facts. It's about responding to that belief.

James in his letter says "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder." (James 2:19). In the lead up to that statement, he explains what the problem is: "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? [...] Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?" (James 2:15-16)

Beyond merely belief, faith will lead us to change and to action, and that's what we've heard about in our reading this morning from the letter to the Hebrews, where the writer says faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. (11:1-2)

The writer goes on to tell us about those ancients - Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David and Samuel – did, because of their faith.

Amongst that selection of Old Testament heroes, the writer highlights two, just by the amount of words devoted to their stories: Abraham and Moses, who each have about seven verses devoted to their stories. Today, we're looking at the story of Abraham.

Abraham lived a very long and eventful life. The writer to the Hebrews tells us how Abraham didn't just believe that God would look after him, but he lived out his faith – his trust in God – by obeying God and going to a foreign land, where he made his home – albeit still living in a tent – where he and Sarah finally had an heir – Isaac, and then Isaac's son, Jacob. And ultimately, how God's promises to Abraham (Genesis 15:1-6) – to have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky – were fulfilled.

Of course, there was a lot more to Abraham's life than we read about in the letter to the Hebrews – and a lot of it wasn't good. But that's true of the other heroes of the Old Testament, too. We find that a lot of what they do isn't good.

We find that Jacob tricked his brother Esau out of his inheritance; Moses killed an Egyptian and hid the body; and David forced himself on Bathsheba – and then arranged to have Bathsheba's husband killed – and so on.

And Abraham? Well, he lied a few times and said Sarah wasn't his wife to save his own skin, and he fathered a child – Ishmael – with his wife's servant Hagar.

But despite all the bad stuff, God was still faithful to each of them, and they still lived out their faith.

Of course, there is a lot more to Abraham's story than the writer to Hebrews includes in this passage. So, why these events, and not and not the others? I think the answer is in how each of these events is introduced – in fact how all the things are introduced in this section of Hebrews, and that's "by faith".

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place... obeyed and went; By faith he made his home in the promised land; by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children.

We're told that these things were done *by faith* – not that they were done faithfully, or in faith, or even with faith but they were done by faith.

Abraham and Sarah acted by faith. They did things that – on the face of them – made no sense to do. They were certainly brave things to do, and they were certainly outside their comfort zones – but they did them *because they had faith in God*.

They did things that most people wouldn't do. They did things that weren't logical or even sensible. They did things that were unexpected. But that's something we see time and time again as we read the scriptures. We see God working through the unexpected: It's the second sons that carry the kingdom of God forward and it's the shepherd boy David who defeats Goliath. Or as we saw only a couple of weeks ago, Hosea was strangely and unexpectedly told to go and marry a promiscuous woman at the start of his ministry as God's prophet.

The unexpected, the unlikely, continues right up until we arrive at the New Testament, when we see Jesus leaving the glories of heaven and becoming one of us, born as a helpless baby in Bethlehem. Then sinless Jesus arriving at the Jordan to be baptised along with the sinful people that he came to save. Ultimately, the innocent Jesus giving himself up to be beaten and humiliated and raised up on the cross, for the sake of each one of us.

That's not logical. That is not the way of the world. It doesn't make sense if you think about these things the way the world does.

Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians "...the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Cor 1:18)

I often come back to that verse because there's just so much in it, and it tells us something important about the faith we have. If we think about it in terms worldly wisdom, the message of the cross is foolishness: It simply doesn't make sense, if you think about things the way the world does – why would God, who created all things, who is all powerful, choose to become incarnate – to send his only begotten Son into his own creation and allow that creation to kill him? It's absurd.

But if we have not just belief, but faith, we know those very same things as the power of God.

Finally, in this section on Abraham, the letter to the Hebrews tells us, "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, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth."

But this time, it's not "By faith Abraham..." it's "All these people were still living by faith..."

Even when they died, they were still looking forward. They weren't going to see all of God's promises fulfilled, yet they still trusted that those promises would be fulfilled.

Our challenge is to live by faith today. And tomorrow, and the day after. And so on.

But as we set out to live by faith, we need to be clear on what our faith is in, because people have faith in all sorts of things. Faith in the goodness of human nature. Faith in technology. Faith in scaffolding. Faith that it will all work out in the end.

Our faith always needs to be in Jesus - the pioneer and perfecter of our faith as the next chapter of the letter to the Hebrews (12:2) tells us.

But we need to make sure that our faith is not simply a belief, but a faith that changes our lives – and ultimately our world. Our actions need to reflect our faith. We need to act, as Abraham did, by faith.

If we look to the great commission at the end of Matthew's gospel, we read that Jesus said to the disciples "...go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Jesus said you are the ones, you are the witnesses. Not people who are better trained or equipped. Not people who are more numerous.

Not people who are more talented or more skilled. Not people who are braver or smarter or younger or have fewer responsibilities. But you. Your faith must lead to action.

It's the same with us. We are the inheritors of that same commission. Our faith has to lead to our action. We can't wait for others to take action for us.

And as we look back over the history of the church, we can see that people have acted by faith time and time again.

And often, they haven't lived to see their work come to fruition. Our society generally wants quick returns and prompt answers. Remember saving up to buy things? Remember lay-buy? Both are pretty rare these days – people today want things now, not some time down the track.

But as we look back, we can see that many people have contributed so much, and contributed in unexpected ways. People have come to faith simply because they've be

greeted with a friendly smile. People have benefited from our charity. People have been encouraged because of the fellowship of faithful Christians.

I've shared before a story of about prison chaplain: One day after the worship service in the prison, he was approached by a prisoner. The prisoner had believed the gospel and wanted to be baptised! This was great news! And the chaplain told the prisoner that he'd prepared a particular good sermon that day, and he'd really felt the Holy Spirit flowing through him as he'd preached it, and before the service he'd been praying that one of the prisoners would come to faith – and his prayer had been answered.

“Don't get too carried away, chaplain”, said the prisoner, “You're the fourteenth.”

“The fourteenth?”

“Oh, I reckon over the years I've heard from thirteen other chaplains, and they've all been praying and preaching and doing the right things... you just happen to be the fourteenth.”

Would the other chaplains have been disappointed that this fellow wasn't converted on their watch? Perhaps. But I'm sure they would have been delighted that he was, ultimately. But each of those chaplains was acting by faith. They were sharing the gospel even though there was no immediate response from the prisoners. And they'd each helped this fellow come to know Jesus.

And that's how it should be with our congregation here. As people visit this building and we witness to them. We should be showing them God's love in action, not because that will get them to join our congregation, but we will be acting by faith, and maybe our actions will help them come to know God's love shown in Jesus.

One of the great things about being a Christian and part of the church – the body of Christ – is that we all get to be part of God's plan. We all get to act by faith: We get to use our talents and our skills and our situations – whatever they might be. But to do that we need to trust in God and act on that trust. To step out in faith – which may very well mean stepping out of our comfort zones, too.

We can also look to the model of all of those who've gone before us. Yes, the heroes that are listed in chapter 11 of the letter to the Hebrews, but also the great cloud of witnesses that the writer describes in the very next chapter, all of those who did things by faith. Those that we read about in the rest of the New Testament and in church history. And, of course, those people who we've known ourselves, who have shown us what it means not just to believe things, but to be truly faithful and to act by faith.

And through it all we can take heart that God is in control. Ultimately, God has a plan, and it is our privilege to be part of that plan, to respond in faith to what God has done for us in Jesus.

Let us all step out bravely and faithfully as Abraham did so that in all times and all places, we will be people who truly do things by faith.

Amen.