Sermon Trinity 8 7 August 2022

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

What a beautiful and succinct summary that is. The writer of the Hebrews is probably best known for this one sentence though there are others to claim that prize, such as the imperative in Hebrews 13: *Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.*

The end of our passage this morning is surely one that inspired Sir Cecil Spring Rice to write the words of I Vow to Thee my Country referencing heaven thus: *And there's another country, I've heard of long ago, most dear to them that love her, most great to them that know.*

Whether Faith gives you the sensitivity to be aware of angels in your midst or gives you hope in the prospect of heaven, it is surely the most extraordinary of gifts; and if you too are blessed with it, then you know that there is nothing material in the world worthy of its exchange.

There’s an idea I want you think about today that has been bubbling around in my head this week. It is simply this: that the gift of Faith is the gift of the Kingdom of God itself.

When we think of the Kingdom of God, we invariably start to imagine either a place, somewhere warm and beautiful surrounded by those we love and those who love us; or, the absence of something – an end to war, injustice, inequality, discrimination. These are the Kingdoms towards which so much of our efforts are directed and rightly so, for these Kingdom desires improve the lives of others immeasurably, including our own.

Yet when Jesus talks about it being our Father’s good pleasure to give us the Kingdom, as we heard in our gospel reading, then something other than utopia in this world or the next must be intended: Jesus is talking about something within us, rather than something external to us. He is talking about a condition of being, a state of existence; He is talking once again about the orientation of our hearts.

One of the troubles we have when thinking about faith, is a recurring, nagging doubt that we have enough of it. It doesn’t matter how often we hear about mustard seeds or the poor behaviour of recalcitrant disciples – yesterday, remember, the church celebrated the transfiguration when Jesus’ closest friends yet again failed to understand who Jesus is – the fear remains that we don’t believe enough in our own belief.

I’m not surprised, in that there are many cultural forces at work against us. At times it feels as if we live in a culture consumed entirely by an obsession with outcomes and the rigorous nature of scientific enquiry. That for anything to be believable it must be irrefutably proven.

At the same time, in the world of politics and celebrity at least, truth and accountability are not the keystone criteria for success and meaning that they once were.

And so, on the one hand faith is questionable because it cannot be proven, whilst on the other hand, holding to belief in anything seems relatively unimportant to power-hungry decision-makers and opinion-shapers – except, of course, when it comes to holding faith in themselves.

If the gift of Faith is the gift of the Kingdom of God - that through Faith we can sense and know the reality of the Kingdom of God in our lives today, as well as in the life to come - then how we nurture our faith, how we strengthen our faith, becomes very important indeed.

Now, Faith is not about believing six impossible things before breakfast. In fact, faith is not about believing impossible things at all.

It is about being convinced that there is a different way of thinking, believing, hoping, than the one that surrounds us in the culture of the world today. It is about standing aside from the worldly priorities of our culture and pointing towards a deeper, life-giving and eternal perspective on everything.

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If our faith is very tentative, then the stories of our faith can build our confidence – Abraham and Sarah for the Jewish audience of the writer to the Hebrews; we might choose more recent inspiration like an Oscar Romero or a Desmond Tutu.

And confidence leads to action; it stimulates the desire to help bring the Kingdom to fruition – however distant that realisation might seem in desperate days like ours. And when we act, we demonstrate our separateness from the world in which we live; we demonstrate our dissatisfaction with values our faith simply does not share. Our Faith becomes the Kingdom.

This is the second Sunday in a row when we have heard Jesus’ warnings about becoming obsessed by what we own and hoard. I don’t for a moment think Jesus wanted us to forgo everything – especially not to the point of becoming dependent upon others – but there is something spiritually refreshing about his invitation to sit light to all our possessions. What we own does say something about what we consider important, how we set our priorities. Living modestly and simply has much to commend it.

Some of you will know that Liz and I are very minded towards the Quakers and have been members in the past. So, I close with one of my very favourite Quaker quotations. The language of George Fox is inevitably 17th century, but the sentiment is very current….

“Be patterns, be examples, in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach amongst all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone.”

Amen.