

Living by Faith

A Sermon preached in St Mary's Walton-on-Thames on Sunday 24th January 2010, the first in the *Deepening Faith* series.

Readings: Genesis 12.1-7; Hebrews 11.1-3, 7-12; Matthew 8. 5-13

I'm sure we've all seen the road sign; the one which looks like a man opening an umbrella on the ground, which means "danger - men at work". Well, this morning, I want a new sign; one that says: 'Look! God at work!'

Not just because it's right to give God thanks and praise, at all times and in all places (though it is). But because at this Thanksgiving Service, we take a moment to thank God for the many blessings He has given us in the past year. Things like:

the Easter Walk; the Mother and Toddler group in the Cromwell Centre; the Holiday Club, the Christmas and Easter Praise Parties, and the Light Party - that much needed Christian alternative on Halloween; the growing contact with the children who attended them, and the change in their lives; our Alpha Courses, including Youth Alpha; the Mission Audit on St John's Estate, the volunteers who were stirred into helping, for the openness of the residents in sharing their experiences; building relationships and growing trust on St John's estate with young and old; the Living Free course, which some of us did in the last spring; for an increase in our planned giving, despite the current economic climate; and influx of new people, including a number of young families; the way so many from our churches are serving the community; the *Chocolat* course in August; Ashley School going to 2-form entry; the Advent Walk, a stunning achievement; thanksgiving for Bert Allwood's ministry; the Parenting Course and the Parenting Teenagers Course; Patrick's appointment as local police Chaplain; a huge amount of faithful service behind the scenes; the growth in faith in ten young people who were Confirmed; the spirit of worship in both churches at Christmas; and much more besides.

So when, in a few moments Steve says ‘Let us give thanks to the Lord our God’, and we reply ‘It is right to give thanks and praise’, may we have all this in mind, and thank God for each of these signs of his love at work in this parish. For each of them says: Look! God at work!

Just as importantly, each is an invitation to us to live by faith; which is why ‘Living by Faith’ is the title of this first sermon in our *Deepening Faith* series. Notice, it’s ‘Living by Faith’, not ‘Having Faith’; as in believing things about God the Father, or Jesus, the Holy Spirit, saying the Creed and meaning it. Simply believing things needn’t change anything about the way we live; thinking in a certain way about God needn’t affect us at all. Nor is this ‘living by faith’ in the particular sense of depending utterly on God to provide money at just the right time to meet our needs, in the way that some individuals and Christian organisations do.

No, for the purposes of this sermon ‘living by faith’ means just that: to live, and make choices, and act, and speak on the basis of our faith in God; and that’s something to which we are all called. The key Bible verse to unlock what this means for us is Hebrews 11.1: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”. Famous words — but what do they mean? We find a clue in the way that Hebrews 11.1 links faith and hope. As Bishop Tom Wright says, ‘Faith is looking at God and trusting him for everything, while hope is looking at the future and trusting God for it.’ The rest of Hebrews 11 confirms this truth from the example of Old Testament heroes of faith — Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and others. The hallmark of their faith was this: that they believed God’s promises; their only guarantee that God’s promise would be fulfilled was God, and his track record of faithfulness.

Take Abraham: “Now the Lord said to Abraham, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your Father’s house to the land that I will show you’. That was the command. Would we have gone, just because God said? Or would we have insisted on having not only a destination, but also a precise itinerary, indicating where we’re stopping off en route for dinner, bed and breakfast?

Then there was the promise: that God would make of Abraham a great nation; that God would bless him; that his name would be great, and that in Abraham all the families of the earth would be blessed. Can’t you just hear the response? ‘Lord, I’m 75. I’ve been looking forward to putting my feet up,

not using them to set off on a journey which, as yet, has no known destination. And as for a great nation, **I'm 75**; my wife is barren. It's not as if we didn't try ..."

Of course, Abraham said nothing of the kind. He set off to a place he didn't know, trusting that God would give the son he'd never had. Why did he do that? Speaking of Abraham and the other faith-heroes of Hebrews 11, the Biblical scholar F.F. Bruce writes: "The promises related to a state of affairs belonging to the future; but these people acted as if that state of affairs were already present, so convinced were they that God could and would fulfil what he had promised. In other words, they were men and women of faith."

How can we live that way? How can we live by faith? Let's begin by hearing our verse again, this time in Tom Wright's own translation: "What then is faith? It is what gives assurance to our hopes. It is what gives us conviction about things we can't see."

The first – and a recurring – step to living by faith is to remind ourselves at regular intervals of who God is and what he has done; in other words, to look afresh at God, so we can learn to trust him for everything. For the faith-heroes of Hebrews 11, their only guarantee was God, and his track record of faithfulness.

Deepening Faith exists is to help us do the same: to remind us of who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what that means for us; so our faith in him can be refreshed and work itself out in new ways. The more we see our Father God as faithful, the more we'll be able to trust him for the future; and the more we'll make decisions and take action on the basis of what He says. The more, in other words, we shall be living by faith.

Next, we shall need persistence to learn to live by what we can't see or prove; as we've already heard, faith "is what gives us conviction about things we can't see." St Paul, in 2 Corinthians 5.7, puts it another way: 'we live by faith, not by sight'.

In church that's something we've got some experience of. At every baptism, we give a baptismal candle to the one being baptised (or to the parents), a living flame which we can see, which represents something we cannot see but which we believe to be true: namely, that the light of Christ has come into the life of the newly-baptised in a new and radical way. Similarly, at this communion service, we shall

take bread and wine, which we can see and taste and touch, and which become for us something that we cannot see – the body and blood of Christ.

We're used to living "by faith, not by sight" when it comes to church sacraments, but outside the door, in the real world? There it's not so easy. Living by faith in that context seems to go against the grain. Because living by faith, not by sight, means unlearning the way we look at the world; unlearning ways of making decisions and doing things, based on what we can see and verify.

Because what we see is not all there is. Some of you will have heard me say before that we live in one world in which there are two realms. There's the realm of material things, of verifiable evidence, and concrete choices. And there's the heavenly realm, what St Paul calls 'the heavenlies'; which we cannot see, but which is no less real. As Christians, we need to learn and go on learning to live not just by sight, nor by the well-trying ways of the world, even when they look like wisdom; because living that way actively inhibits our capacity to catch hold of God's reality. We need to learn and go on learning to live by a faith-grounded conviction about things which are real and true and of God, even if we can't see them or verify them.

Having called to mind the wonder of who God is and what he has done in Christ, and resolving to live by faith, rather than sight; then third, and vitally, we need to keep hope in the frame. For "faith is the assurance of things hoped for". It follows that if we're not living in hope, we're not going to find it easy to live by faith. We're not very good at hope nowadays, partly because we've grown so used to hearing people say "I hope that ..." when it's obvious from their tone that they have no lively expectation of whatever it is happening.

Christian hope is not like that. Christian hope is not optimism. Nor is Christian hope mere wishful thinking. According to St Paul, hope is one of the three things which abide for ever; it's companions are faith and love. They belong together. The greatest of these is indeed love, because love is who God is. But that doesn't mean we can overlook hope.

Like faith, all true Christian hope is focussed on God. When things look hopeless, it's often because we've taken our attention away from God, and focussed instead on whatever the problem is, and we see all the difficulties, and it all becomes too difficult, and beyond us, and impossible. The great

gospel example of this is the episode when, in the middle of a storm on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus invites Peter to step out of the boat and walk to him on the water. While Peter's attention was on Jesus, he was fine. Things went wrong only when his focus wandered away from Jesus, and he started to look at the swell, and hear the whistle of the wind; and he began to sink – though even then, Jesus stretched out his hand and pulled him up. So it is also with hope: we need to keep our primary focus on God.

Don't get me wrong: it's not that the difficulties aren't real. In the coming year we shall no doubt face difficult situations and hard choices; it will be tempting to focus exclusively on the problems with all their complexities. The trouble is that when we forget to keep our primary focus on God, and on his faithfulness and his promises; when we don't keep God-centred hope in the frame, we're never going to see the whole picture; we're never going to have the true perspective, which is the unseen reality of the Kingdom of Kingdom.

It boils down to this: hope feeds faith; and faith undergirds hope; which, in turn, increases our capacity to live by faith. And so it goes on, as faith gives assurance to our hopes, and conviction about things we can't see. This kind of life isn't just for faith-heroes, let alone vicars! This way of living by faith is for all of us.

On reflection, perhaps we should keep the sign of the person digging as the image for this *Deepening Faith* course (though I'd still want an image that says the 'Look! God at work!', if only to superimpose it on the digger). For just as precious gems and nuggets of gold tend not to lie on the surface, but are only reached through digging deep into the earth; so too, when it comes to matters of faith, the richest treasures are to be found when we delve deeper, often on ground we thought we'd covered already. And when that happens, then when others look at us, and catch a glimpse of the light of Christ shining from within, they may be able to say 'Look! God at work!' To him be the praise and the glory.

Charles Stewart