

Sermon 14 July 2024 Faith

Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-12 Luke 12:35-40

Our readings give us an insight into the issue of faith. To the writer to Hebrews faith is absolutely certain that what it believes is true and that what it expects will happen, and that reward will follow.

We have the example of Abraham, that great man of faith, who was prepared to venture out into the unknown, put himself completely in God's hands. He was rewarded. *'Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.'* Similarly, Sarah, who after initial incredulousness, believed and her faith was rewarded.

The Gospel reading refers to the second coming of Christ, our need to believe in that and so prepare ourselves for that (*'You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour'* Luke 12:40), and in so doing, we will be rewarded.

So, let's have a look at this issue of faith. A few years ago, when I was Chaplain at King's College, a student wrote, 'How can I believe in someone of whose existence you cannot prove to me? How can I believe in something that I cannot see or feel, and don't know for sure is there? I know there is something there, some supernatural force but I don't really know what it is.'

I said to the student, 'Join the club! You are certainly not on your own.' What this student wrote reflects two common points about our faith in God. The first point is that there is undoubtedly a sense of confusion and this confusion is invariably manifested in what can be contradictory statements, such as 'I don't really believe in God,' and almost in the next breath, 'I know there is something out there.' That something is actually God, it's just that there is a degree of uncertainty as to the form of God.

Speaking of contradictions, those same people who profess to not believe in God, will often resort to saying a prayer to God when they are faced with pain or trauma in their lives. I remind you of a very good example.

A week after the Christchurch massacre in 2019, there was a national call to prayer. Thousands of people all over the country came together, not so much in churches but in parks and other large outdoor venues to take part in prayer. The turnout was massive and the make-up of those crowds very diverse. Now, the interesting point is that the majority of these people would not have been church attenders and in the normal course of events would probably be quite ambivalent in terms of their acknowledgment of God, and yet here they all were, congregating for the prime purpose of prayer. There has to be some sort of contradiction in this, but it is a contradiction I am more than happy to accommodate.

The second point raised is this problem of believing in something of which there is no tangible proof. So, we are asked to exercise faith. Most of us are not really and willing to accept something out of hand, we quite like to have tangible proof. But the reality is that faith is something we practise on a daily basis. When we step into an elevator, we do so in faith, as we do when we climb into an aeroplane.

The thing is, it is a faith born and created out of experience, and I guess it is the same with God. It is only when we experience God that we can experience that faith, and the only way to experience God is to be open to him.

There is the story of a man who went to a barber to have his hair cut and his beard trimmed. He started to have a good conversation with the barber. They talked about many things, and they touched on the subject of God. The barber said, 'Look man, I don't believe that God exists as you say. I mean, you just have to go out on the street to realise he doesn't exist. If God existed, would there be so many sick people? Would there be hungry children? If God existed, surely there would be no suffering and pain?'

The client thought about this. He didn't respond as he didn't want to cause an argument. The barber finished his job and the client went out on to the street. Immediately, he saw a man with long hair and a rather scruffy beard. He turned around and went back into the barbershop, and he said to the barber, 'You know, barbers don't exist.'

'How can you say that?' exclaimed the barber. 'I am here and I am a barber.' 'No,' the client said, 'they don't exist because if they did, then there would be no people with long hair and beards like that man out on the street.' The barber replied, 'Ah, barbers do exist, but what happens is that people do not come to me.' 'Exactly,' affirmed the client. 'That's the point. God does exist, but people don't go to him and do not look for him. That's why there is so much pain and suffering in the world.'

To experience God is personal, very personal. It is not something we can impose on anyone. We have to experience it ourselves. Close yourself off to God and you will not experience him.

Bishop Williams, Bishop of Leicester, wrote in his book, "Faith and the Faith," *'Faith, in the sense of religious faith, is caught not taught.'* You cannot foist a faith on anyone. You can share but in the end people will be drawn to God by what you do, not so much by what you say.

Let me conclude by making this point. God is a mystery, and it is important that he remains a mystery. Let me explain.

For any life to be sustained, it must be in state of growth. Once growth ceases, the inevitable consequence is death. It may take some time, but it will come to pass. This maxim is as applicable to the human race as to any life. As humans our growth is not restricted to the physical, we also grow spiritually and intellectually. Knowing and understanding God must surely be the ultimate answer to all our spiritual and intellectual questions. Understand God and you understand the big questions of life, including the big one of what happens to us when we die.

So, on that premise, if we reached a point in this earthly life where we understood God, we actually would have nowhere to go. Growth as such would have to cease and the inevitable outcome would be death. I don't mean as individuals, I mean as a species. That is a frightening thought.

So, God must always remain something of a mystery to us. But we must continue to reach out and up to him. We do this in faith and we are undoubtedly rewarded. As Jesus said, *'Happy are those who believe in me without seeing me.'* John 20:29.

I finish with the words of Gregory Peck, well-known actor from the middle of last century, *'Faith gives you an inner strength and a sense of balance in your life.'*

