# **Faith – Sermon 18th May 2014**

**Reading 1: Hebrews 10:19 – 12:3**

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, 20by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, 21and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. 23Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 25not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.

37For, *“In just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay.”*

38And,

*“But my righteous one will live by faith. And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back.”*

39But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.

**Hebrew 11**

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. 2This is what the ancients were commended for.

3By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

4By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.

5By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: “He could not be found, because God had taken him away.” For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. 6And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

7By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith.

8By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

***Continuing from verse 17***

17By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, 18even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” 19Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.

*The passage continues with a list of heroes of the faith*

* *Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab etc.*
* *Men and women who served God despite the consequences*
* *Carrying on from verse 37*

They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— 38the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground. 39These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised,40since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

**Hebrews 12:1-3**

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, **2**fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.**3**Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

**Introduction**

This morning I wanted to talk about faith

* We know we are saved by faith, not by our work or effort (Gal 3)
* We have just read in Heb. 11:6 *“Without faith it is impossible to please God”*
* In Romans 1:17 we are told *“The righteous will live by faith.”*

Last week we had our sharing service

* Right at the end Hilary gave me a daily devotion about faith to share.
* It was about the disciples asking Jesus to increase their faith
* I wasn’t sure about sharing it then
* So I said I would preach on faith next week – which is today

I had been praying for a topic

* And this seemed a good place to start
* Later that evening Hilary phoned me up
* She had been reading a book by Jim Cymbala called ‘Fresh Faith’
* As it happened I had a copy and started to read it
* And couldn’t put it down

It seemed to be fitting perfectly to how I was feeling

* And expressing what I didn’t quite know how to say
* So this week has been a bit of a journey for me
* So I want to begin with a confession or testimony

**Confession**

I have been struggling in my faith for a while

* I know It’s all true – I still believe in God and the bible
* But I’ve lost my expectation of God to act here and now
* And it sometimes feels like I’m just going through the motions
* It is a hard and frustrating place to be.

My response has been to try and work harder

* But that doesn’t really help
* Because its faith not work that is required
* On Sunday Evenings I would come along to the prayer meetings
* And I would feel really discouraged

Viv would try to encourage me

* But it just felt like too much hard work
* But thank you to Viv for her faithfulness in coming week after week
* So when Hilary gave me a devotional on the Disciples asking for more faith
* It did seem quite pertinent

Many years ago, when I was young man

* I went along to a weekend retreat with the church I was going to.
* The speaker led us through a number of bible studies that I can’t remember
* I I do remember him leading us in a little mantra
* All saying together these words “*God said it, I believe it that settles it!”*

We all repeated these a few times and sung a few stirring songs

* And everyone was encouraged - except me
* I was being grumpy – Not like me I know!!
* But I couldn’t see how repeating a mantra was really changing us

To make matters worse at one point during the weekend we had a question and answer session

* A question was asked about Jesus’ teaching on money
* And this same preacher suggested that on such issues we had to be sensible
* I had a real urge to interrupt and say

*‘God said it, I believe it, but you’ve got to be sensible’*

Fortunately, I resisted the temptation

* I am probably misrepresenting this poor man
* Because I do believe we need to be sensible
* Particularly in understanding what God has said
* Making sure we’ve got that right with scripture and wise Christian counsel
* But when we are sure we sometimes need to obey rather than be sensible

Like those heroes of faith we read about earlier

* There was nothing sensible about Noah building a boat miles from any water
* Or Abraham agreeing sacrificing his son

Some of you will remember Drew

* He used to be a member here a few years ago
* He had an experience of being in church
* and he noticed a man in front of him getting very agitated
* Eventually this chap jumped up and shouted ‘Polo’s!’
* As you can imagine there was a confused pause in the service
* But suddenly a girl began to cry and rushed out of the meeting

Someone followed her

* And she explained she had been doubting the existence of God
* And had prayed

“Okay God, if you are real, get someone to stand up and shout ‘Polo’s”

* It is no wonder the man was agitated
* It must have taken a lot of faith and courage to stand up and say something so stupid

In the devotional Hilary gave me last week the key was practice

* Our faith is increased as we practice it
* Real faith is not a witty mantra
* Real faith is forged in the fire of doubt, fear and pain of trial and temptation
	+ It is holding on and keeping going despite the pain
	+ It is standing up despite the fear and embarrassment
	+ And stepping out despite the doubt
* That is what it really means to practice being faithful.

There is a wonderful story in the bible in Mark 9

* A man brings his son to Jesus
* The boy has uncontrollable fits
* The disciples have tried to heal him but without success
* So they bring the child to Jesus

The father pleads “If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”

* “*If* you can’?”  Jesus replies
* “Everything is possible for one who believes.”
* We are told in verse 24

*“Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”*

Now that is a saying I can relate to

* I believe, help my unbelief!
* This where we are starting from this morning
* A desire to have more faith
* A prayer, to help our unbelief.

**The need For More faith**

I want to think briefly about our need for more faith

* There is a definition of faith in Hebrews 11:1

*“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”*

Faith is choosing to trust God and his promises rather than our feelings or circumstances

* There are many illustrations of this in Hebrews 11
* But I want to think about one of them for a minute (vs. 17-19)

*“By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, 18even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” 19Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.”*

Now I have a son, whom I love dearly

* I am really proud of him
* And if I am honest there is no way I could sacrifice him
* There are times when I’ve felt I could murder him
* But sacrifice him –Never
* I love him too much!

But then Abraham also loved Isaac

* The son of his old age
* The boy he feared he would never have
* The issue is not how much we love
* But how much we trust God

Abraham trusted God enough to give him the most valuable thing he had

* And Isaac was more than his most beloved son
* He was the fulfilment of all God’s promises to Abraham
* The whole of his life he had followed God on a promise
* Now God was asking him to give up on that too.

But Abraham’s faith

* His trust in God was bigger than all he wanted to keep
* And in trusting God he gained more than he ever gave up.

You see faith is not just about trusting God

* Not just doing what he calls us to do
* It’s about giving up what is precious to us
* Letting go of what we rely on
* It is sacrificing our deepest desires, hopes and dreams to him

When we mentioned the apostles coming to Jesus and saying,

* “Lord, Increase our faith!” (Luke 17:5)
* What was the context
* What challenge caused them to make this plea?

Was it some challenge to preach the gospel?

* Or prayer for healing?
* Or power over evil spirits
* No!
* It was the command to forgive (vs 3-4)

Jesus said (Luke 17:3-6)

*If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying ‘I repent,’ you must forgive them.”*

*The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”*

*He replied, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.*

They recognised the requirement to give up their hurt

* Give up on their rights, their self-worth even
* That required real faith
* Forgiveness requires us to trust God
* Failure to forgive shows a lack of trust

**Signs of weak faith**

So what happens when we fail to trust God?

* When our fears override our faith
* There is a salutary lesson in Numbers 14
* The people have been saved from Egypt, crossed the Red Sea and the wilderness
* The promised land awaits

12 spies have surveyed the land.

* 2 of them were full of excitement
* But the other 10 were full of fear
* “The land is full of big and scary people, if we attack them we will be destroyed.”

In Numbers 14:1 we read

*That night all the members of the community raised their voices and wept aloud.****2****All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, “If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness!****3****Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt?”****4****And they said to each other, “We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”*

***5****Then Moses and Aaron…..**Joshua and Caleb, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes****7****and said to the entire Israelite assembly, “The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them.”*

***10****But the whole assembly talked about stoning them.*

What a mess

* The people’s faith has failed by the bad report of the spies
* What is the consequence
	+ Fear. – we’re going to fall by the sword
	+ Refusal to obey – we’re going back to Egypt
	+ Blaming their leaders – in vs. 10 they are even talking of stoning them

I think if we are honest we recognise something of this

* It happens in church too
* Lack of faith leading to negativity and criticism of the pastor and deacons
* To be fair not all criticism of leaders is due to lack of faith
* Sometimes it is because they deserve to be criticised
* But lack of faith will lead to blame and recrimination.

So now we come to the crux of the matter

**How do we Increase our faith?**

Let’s take up the story many years later after they have finally entered the Promised Land

* Joshua calls all the people together and gives them advice (Joshua 23:3-9)

***3****You yourselves have seen everything the Lord your God has done to all these nations for your sake; it was the Lord your God who fought for you.****4****Remember how I have allotted as an inheritance for your tribes all the land of the nations that remain—the nations I conquered—between the Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea in the west.****5****The Lord your God himself will push them out for your sake. He will drive them out before you, and you will take possession of their land, as the Lord your God promised you.*

***7****Do not associate with these nations that remain among you; do not invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them.****8****But you are to hold fast to the Lord your God, as you have until now.*

***9****“The Lord has driven out before you great and powerful nations; to this day no one has been able to withstand you.****10****One of you routs a thousand, because the Lord your God fights for you, just as he promised.****11****So be very careful to love the Lord your God.*

There are four points I would like to take from this advice

1. Look Back with thanksgiving vs.3

*You yourselves have seen everything the Lord your God has done to all these nations for your sake*

Remember all that God has done for us and be grateful

* Think of His faithfulness to you in the past
* Do not allow the present circumstances to rob you of the that
* If we begin by thanking God it helps us to trust him

The writer to the Hebrews is saying something similar (Heb. 10:19-22)

*Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, 20by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, 21and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings.”*

If Jesus has died for us and opened a way for us

* What grounds do we have to doubt him?
* Be certain and sure, He will not fail to finish what he has begun
* Again from Hebrews we are exhorted to

*“Hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful”*

Our faith must be in Jesus, and his faithfulness

* Not in ourselves and our own efforts
* It’s not easy we need to encourage each other (vs 24, Heb. 10)

*“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 25not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another”*

1. Look forwards with anticipation vs. 5

*“The Lord your God himself will push them out for your sake. He will drive them out before you, and you will take possession of their land, as the Lord your God promised you.*

As we read in Heb. 11:1

*“Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see”*

Jim Cymbala observes that faith follows promise not commands

* Again in the passage in Hebrews we read (Heb. 10:36)

*“Do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.*

* Because (vs. 39)

*“We do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.”*

1. Look inwardly with care vs.6

*“Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left.*

Joshua knew the people had to keep themselves pure and holy to maintain their faith

* The influence of other nations would pollute them and cause a loss of faith
* Now we must be careful how we interpret these passages
* In the old testament this was how God kept his people pure
* And we need to keep ourselves from being polluted by the world (James 1:27)

But at the same time we must remember Jesus came to rescue sinful men and women

* We must be careful not to reject those he came to save.
* It is not people we need to keep away from

 “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Eph. 6:12)

Neither must we become too self-absorbed

* Constantly beating ourselves up for past sins shows a lack of faith
* As it says in the Hebrew passage (Heb. 10:22,23)
* *“Having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. 23Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful”*
* Faith allows us to know that once repented sins are gone and we are pure and clean
* It is the shield of faith that allows us to extinguish the accusations of the evil one (Eph. 6:16)
1. Look to Jesus with determination (Josh 23:8)

*But you are to hold fast to the Lord your God, as you have until now.*

The writer to Hebrews tells us to *“Fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.”* (Heb. 12:2)

* When Peter walked on the water
* What caused him to sink
* Was it the height of the waves or strength of the wind
* Or was it because he took his eyes off Jesus

This really is the key

* Keep our eyes on Jesus
* He began our faith – He will perfect our faith

**Conclusion**

Like the disciples we need to be asking Jesus to increase our faith

* But be careful he usually increases it by testing it!
* We need to keep our eyes on Jesus
* And not be distracted by the problems we see or imagine

When trouble and trials occur we must not react with fear and blame.

* But humbly seek god to increase our faith and give us his peace
* Read his word (Romans 10:17 “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.”)
* Be diligent in Prayer and thanksgiving
* Seek the Holy Spirit for power
* And encourage one another

Amen