

## **Faith: God saves all who believe**

**12th March 2017**

*A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, at St Paul's Cathedral on the Second Sunday of Lent 2017 as part of his series of Lent addresses Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done – Knowing Jesus Christ: Finding Salvation*

Last week, we reflected on what it means to 'turn away from sin, and be faithful to Christ', the words used in the liturgy for the beginning of Lent on Ash Wednesday, at which many people choose to receive an ash cross on their foreheads as an external sign of penitence. We heard about how St Paul urged the early Christian community in Rome to be mindful of the destructive power of sin. We traced the origins of sin, back to the first acts of human disobedience, when the first humans chose to be tempted to live with the complexity of good of evil, and thus rejected the paradisiac harmony of the garden of Eden. We looked at how Jesus himself overcame the all-too-human temptations to strive for comfort, power, and the worship of evil. And we spent some time thinking about what it means for us to turn from sin, and be faithful to Christ: to reject the tyranny of death, and to embrace life.

In order to be faithful to Christ, we first of all need to have faith. Just as salvation, so faith is also a gift from God. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews speaks of 'faith' as the 'assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (Hebrews 11.1). Faith is a sure and certain hope. The certainty of our hope and conviction is based on experience and trust. The trust in a purposeful God, who calls people into relationship with him, and the experience of having trusted in God. Faith enables us to shape our experience of the world around us, and to trace the presence of God in our day to day living. The writer to the Hebrews put it like this: 'By faith we understand that the world were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible' (Hebrews 11.2). Faith, then, is a bridge between the invisible, distant creator and his creation, is what gives shape and certainty to the journey of discipleship.

Faith 'opens the eyes of our hearts', our patron St Paul wrote to the Ephesians (1.18). We know the hope of our calling – the hope of our sharing forever in the presence of Christ – through our beliefs. Faith seeks understanding, St Anselm famously said. Faith seeks understanding when we seek to understand more about God by reflecting on his word, through prayer and through fellowship. Faith seeks understanding when we relate our experiences of the world to our beliefs, and recognise how God is at work in our lives. Faith that does not seek understanding does no longer grow, the early Christian writer St Augustine knew: 'I believe in order to understand; and I understand the better to believe', he said (Sermo 43.7, 9, quoted in Migne, PL 153, 225A). When we inform our faith, we understand God better, and when we understand God better, our faith is strengthened. Faith, then, there for all stages of our journey of belief: at the beginning, when we first believe; as we grow in faith and understanding, and at the end of our faith-journeys. Faith is the beginning of our life in God, and therefore the beginning of life forever in his company.

Today's readings give us an insight both into what faith is, and what God desires for those who believe, and seek to understand his will for them. Our readings assure us that when we believe, our lives are likely to be radically changed when we trust in God's promises for us. Our first lesson, from the book Genesis, tells of God's call of a man from Haran, Abram, to leave behind his native land and to set out, in trust, to a new future. For more than ten generations, since the days of Noah and his children, God's voice had not been heard in the world. God speaks to Abram, and commands him 'to set out, not knowing where he was going', to 'the land that I – God – will show you'. God promises Abram a new land, and a future. Abram, who had already reached old age – he was 75 years old at the time of God's call to him – is promised to be the first of a great nation, God's people. 'In you, the families of the earth shall be blessed', God promises. 'By faith, from one person, and this one as good as dead', the writer to the Hebrews reflects later, 'descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore"' (Hebrews 11.12).

Abram put his faith in God, and in turn received a new future: he is given a new name – Abraham – and a new homeland. He is promised blessing: the blessing of God, and the blessing of many nations. At the time he set out, he had nothing other than God's call, God's word to him, to rely on. By the time he died, he was inhabiting the future God had promised, a patriarch of a great nation, Israel. Abraham in hope believed against hope, looking in faith to the homeland and nation that is forever – the kingdom of God. 'He looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God', the writer to the Hebrews reflects. Abraham believed in God, and his faith enabled him to regard the world – with his own share of suffering, temptation, evil, even death – through the lens of faith. He was able to regard the world as is, and in it see traces of the promise of God, the author and builder of the kingdom that is forever. And because of this faith, our second reading affirms, he was considered righteous: 'Abraham believed in God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness', Paul cites the Hebrew Scriptures (Romans 4.3).

Because of his faith, his confident trust in the promises of God, Abraham was deemed righteous before God. Not because of his actions. Some of Abraham's actions were questionable, to say the least: his sending away of his slave-woman Hagar, the mother of his firstborn son Ishmael, to her certain death in the harsh wilderness of Shur, for instance. Abraham was deemed righteous before God because of his unwavering trust in God. Abraham had faith in God's salvation, and on the basis of this faith was forgiven his shortcomings: 'blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven', Paul quotes the Psalms to illustrate what it means to be righteous. Abraham was not perfect before God, he may not even have been entirely good. But he was righteous before God, because he believed in the power of God to call us away from our past into a future that God will show us, and because he believed in the power of God to transform our lives. And that transformation includes the forgiveness of our sins: 'to those who, without expecting a reward, trust the God who justifies even the ungodly, to those that faith is reckoned as righteousness', Paul assures the Romans (Romans 4.6).

And thereby turns our expectations neatly on their head. We, who often strive for perfection, are told that it is not our actions, our works, but our faith, our belief in God's good purposes for us, that will save us. Those who have faith in God's salvation, and turn away from their sins, Paul writes, will receive God's blessing: 'they have their sins covered' (Romans 4.7). God's righteousness comes to Abraham because of his faith, and through Abraham that promise of righteousness comes to all people – the Jews who were the first to heed God's call as well as the Greeks and Romans, and many other nations that have since responded to that call: God's righteousness comes to Abraham because of his faith, and makes us children of Abraham because of our trust in God's call. The outward sign of God's imparting righteousness on Abraham, the outward symbol of God's faithfulness and our desire to follow God faithfully, for Abraham and the people of Israel was the circumcision of the firstborn. That sign is important, Paul tells the Romans. But what is even more important, Paul reminds them, is Abraham's initial faith: 'the promise that Abraham would inherit the world did not come to him or his descendants by the law – by the symbol of their covenant – but through the righteousness of faith', Paul assures his readers (Romans 4.13).

How can our faith save us? Paul tells the Romans that it is by our certainty in the God who 'gives life to the dead and who calls into existence the things that do not exist' that we are saved (Romans 4.16). We are saved when we believe that life is not just a random collection of occurrences, but that life is given shape and purpose by a God who loves his people, and who gave the life of his own Son so that his people may have life forever in his presence. We are saved when we believe that God gave his Son to be 'lifted up on a cross as a sign to the world, so that' as our gospel reading puts it, 'whoever believes in him may have eternal life' (John 3.16). We are saved when we trust in the God who justifies the ungodly. We are saved when we look, like Abraham, for the signs to the 'city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God' (Hebrews 11.10). We are saved when we look for the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, and know him to be the crucified Son of God. We are saved by our faith in Jesus, 'who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God' (Hebrews 12.2).

This is the heart of faith: believing that Jesus truly is who he said he was, and that God truly did give himself to the human race in love, and by his own death overcame our deaths. That is the heart of our faith that Nicodemus, in today's Gospel reading, found so hard to understand, and only would perceive when we cradled in his arms the lifeless body of the crucified Jesus, and helped prepare him for his three-day burial. Turning in faith to Jesus means accepting his testimony as true, as Jesus tells Nicodemus in John's gospel. Turning in faith to Jesus means believing in his earthly ministry and signs, so that we might have confidence and trust in the promise of the heavenly kingdom. 'How can you believe about heavenly things if I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe', Jesus asks Nicodemus and, with him, us. The promise that Abraham would inherit the world did not come to him through works but through faith, Paul knew. The promise that we would inherit the kingdom of heaven does not come to us through works but through faith in the testimony of Christ, John recorded in his gospel. We believe, in order to understand; we understand, the better to believe, Augustine encourages us.

Faith is nothing other than the beginning of eternal life. If you have not yet made a formal commitment to faith in Jesus, I encourage you to place your trust in him and to talk to one of our clergy about how you can learn more about Jesus Christ, and following him. Pray for the gift of understanding, and ask that you might know and love God, and that he might make himself known to you. For those of us who already are followers of Jesus, pray for others with whom you would share the gift of faith. Last week I suggested that you might wish to pray for a friend or a group of friends or colleagues, whom you would like to know Jesus. Pray for them and you, in the week to come that your heart and theirs may be opened to the reality of God's love. Pray that the eyes of your heart and theirs may be opened, that you and they would be given assurance and conviction, and hope.

In the week to come, continue praying that your will be conformed to God's: 'Lord Jesus, thy kingdom come, thy will be done'. And as you pray for your will to be conformed to God's, pray especially for the gift of faith that reveals the love of God. Pray for the confidence that even 'though now we see through a glass, darkly, then we shall see face to face'. Do so consistently, and persistently knowing that even though 'now we know only in part, then we will know fully, and be fully known' by God (1 Corinthians 13.12).

'Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all' (Romans 4.16). Thanks be to God.