

Pentecost IV (A)
Genesis 12.1-9/Romans 4.13-25/Matthew 9.9-26
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
8 June 2008

FAITH: THE OTHER WAY AROUND

~Paul H. Friesen~

We are meant to talk about 'faith' today. In the Gospel we heard about the faith of a desperate religious leader whose daughter had just died, and the faith of a woman weary of suffering after a dozen years. And in the ancient Jewish book of *Genesis* and in the Christian *Epistle to the Romans* we heard of the faith of Abram, the patriarch who crossed the Middle East in pursuit of God.

But what is faith? To tell the truth the term 'faith' is tossed around quite a bit today, sometimes in ways that are either off the mark or unhelpful to us this morning. Children are sometimes taught to have 'faith in themselves'—but without the promise of the adults around them to love them and teach them. Adults are often encouraged to 'have faith' that they will win the lottery, or win a television talent show, or hope that 'things will work out' with nothing really behind this but the (forgivable) desire to succeed.

There is nothing wrong with optimism in many human situations—it helps keep our spirits up. And if we truly understand a situation and the people in it we can often be truly optimistic. But today's biblical stories aren't Christian examples of optimism.

On the other hand, Christians have had a long argument about faith amongst themselves. St. Augustine of North Africa argued with Pelagius of Britain. Augustine understood faith as a response to God's grace, not our power to believe.

The argument returned to Europe where 500 years ago. Anglicanism was founded when the Church of England was excommunicated—condemned—by the bishop of Rome (the Pope). Part of the debate was over the role of human faith.

Today the Roman church has moved away from its claims that we 'contribute to our salvation' by the good things we do as well as faith. And on the other hand most Anglicans, and Protestants, have backed off from one of their original claims that God pre-determines some humans for salvation, and that faith is therefore guaranteed to some but impossible for others. Most theologians today, of all stripes, flavours and denominations would say that we are saved by God's grace *via* human faith.

So what is Christian faith? There are a few famous definitions. The *Epistle to the Hebrews* is certainly one. It says: 'Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen'. But then the author launches into example after example to fill out the meaning of those words in terms of God's promises to the human race. Faith is easier to describe, and tell stories about, than to define with a water-tight definition.

So we need to go back to the beginning, to the basics first. And that's all we will do this morning, with the story of Abram, whose name God eventually changed to Abraham, which means 'father of many nations,' as we hear in *Romans* 4.18.

In his letter to the earliest Christian church in Rome, the apostle Paul claimed Abraham as a great example of faith for the whole world: 'he is the father of all of us,' Paul said. The Apostle said this to the Jewish community in which he was raised, and to the rest of the world which he prayed would enter the church as well.

As he recounts Abraham's successful pilgrimage through life, St. Paul said: 'it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace.'

Abraham's life of faith rested on God's promise, that God would bless him, and through him bless the world. Abraham didn't trust in his faith, he trusted that God was faithful, that God would not abandon him; that God would keep his promise. Paul put it this way: '[Abraham] grew strong in faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.'

There is a great temptation to think that what we are being asked to do, is to have the power of faith that Abraham had, and by this power please God! Unfortunately this is actually preached by some folks who mean no harm, but do it.

It's the other way around, as Abraham's story shows us. God loved him, and promised his love first.

There is no question in the Christian tradition that God loves us. 'For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son...' says the most famous verse in the Bible. 'We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ...for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven,' we say in the creed at the Eucharist.

Faith is a matter of how we respond to God's love, God's promise to never forsake us.

As the Apostle puts it at the end of his story of Abraham; God only desires us to respond to his promise, and will be delighted when we respond. This

response is called ‘righteousness’ of ‘faith’: ‘It will be reckoned to us who believe in [God] who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who has handed over to death *for* our trespasses and was raised *for* our justification.’

The emphasis is always on our response to what God has done for us. This is faith. We can’t ever skip God’s gift and talk all the time about what we think we’ve done for God.

That’s to get it the wrong way around. And it only leads to disappointment on the one hand, or self-righteousness on the other hand.

Now, we’re not always happy with what God has done for us. Neither was Abraham. God dragged him half way around the world as he knew it and kept postponing granting him and Sarah a child, till Sarah laughed and Abraham got desperate.

And if we understand the Scriptures properly, we have to say we’re not promised what others are in particular situations—a child, or a healing from a physical illness, or other things. But we are always promised that God’s love will never forsake us. To live in this truth is to enter into the life of faith. And to believe that God will bless others through us is to live the life of faith.

I want to draw your attention to something Abraham did in faith. We know he travelled to a new land, leaving behind most of his clan. We know he believed God would bless the world through him. But how did he make this real to himself?

This is how the first part of the story of Abraham concludes:

Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land.’ So he built an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed on by stages.

Abraham built altars in response to God’s promise to bless him, and bless the world. A scholar has helpfully pointed out: ‘For [Abram] the altar is more memorial stone than a stone of sacrifice.’¹

In other words, God didn’t come to Abram because Abram pleased God with animal sacrifices. *It was the other way around.* It was because God spoke to Abram and then showed himself to Abram, that Abram knew God loved him and would bless others through him. It was because God first loved him that Abram set up his memorial stone. This was an act of faith.

¹ O. Procksch, in Claus Westermann’s *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*, trans. John S. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), p.155.

We all have memorial stones that mark God's love to us. We have set them up as signs of God's promises on our life's pilgrimage. These memorial stones might be an experience of divine grace we keep in our heart, or a programme that was established in our parish, or a particular place in a forest or by the sea to which we return to remember God's grace.

These don't earn us God's favour; they are acts of faith we remember. *It is the other way around.* They are acts of faith in response to God's promise that God will never forsake us.

And that of course is what we do in the Eucharist week by week. We remember God's faithfulness to us.

But we need to go on, don't we, like Abram, setting up our own memorials in our own lives as well, and in the life of this parish.

How refreshing it would be if a parish programme was not a dreary duty, but a living memorial of God's love, by which we remember God's faithfulness to us. To live as a parish this way is to live in faith, in response to God's love.

How refreshing it would be if the things to which we committed ourselves or our household were acts of faith like Abram's altars. Because when we returned to these commitments and duties we would remember that God was there first with open arms.

This would help us, wouldn't it, 'journey on by stages' as the Scriptures tell us that Abram did. This is to live in faith.

Faith won't tell us what lies ahead, or what will or won't be there awaiting us. Common sense and spiritual preparedness—the disciplined Christian life will help us meet these things.

But at the root of all is resting in God's promise, and remembering God's love—and setting up memorials. This is the life of faith.

Amen.