

## Faith in the unseen

*Hebrews 11:1-16*

Faith has had a bad press ever since the Enlightenment period of the Eighteenth Century, which elevated the practice of human rationality as the pinnacle of human achievement. Faith has been described in negative terms, from the derogatory “believing what you know isn’t true” approach through to a more tolerant but still dismissive “believing what can’t be proved.” After all, human rationality has been credited with great discoveries, powerful theories, brilliant insights, and magnificent inventions. Against this, faith is now seen these days as either an eccentric pastime for the elderly or the uneducated, for people who are unable to cope with modern concepts and knowledge, or as a dangerous passion for the fanatic who is seen as perhaps more likely to engage in mass murder than to undertake the more traditional works of mercy for the unfortunate and the troubled. Faith is something that is seen at work when kidnap victims are beheaded in front of television cameras, or suicide bombers videoing their last messages for families and the world. In times like these, it is difficult to advocate the idea that faith is normal and natural for everyone, and that faith in God does not necessarily set someone on the path of self-destruction or political fanaticism. We can’t even claim that this is the preserve of Islam, as there have been fanatical and destructive Christians who have advocated reprehensible behaviour in the name of their faith in God. There are some who would see George Bush and Tony Blair as cloaking their warmongering in a presumed righteousness deriving from their public demonstrations of faith.

Even if we can avoid the taint of fanaticism and propensity to engage in destructive activities in the name of “God”, Christians are still on the outskirts of polite society in many ways. There is the more tolerant label of “people of faith” to describe believers, a label that includes people of any persuasion, from traditional Christians through to the most bizarre and outlandish views of people who look for salvation from aliens in flying saucers, those who claim to live on nothing but air, and other similar and strange views. The label of “people of faith” is a label I reject as I do not believe that anyone is more or less a person of faith than any other. Nor do I believe that it is unimportant what you believe, as long as you believe something. The distinction should be made not between those who have faith and those who do not. No, all

people, who are as human beings believers by nature, can be distinguished into groups depending on what it is in which they place their faith. We have chosen to place our faith in God: others place their faith in their ability to manage their own lives, in the power of wealth or good fortune, or even in the spiritual forces that roam the streets looking for open doors to enter and goldfish bowls and mirrors to concentrate in and bounce off. We live in an age when scientific research and discovery is a daily subject of conversation, whether over the latest discoveries in fertility treatment and cloning experiments, or bizarre theories over the true behaviour of subatomic particles ensnared in the gravitational forces of cosmic black holes. If it were not for the light of Christian teaching about the power of idolatrous faith, it would be truly remarkable that such rampant superstition sits comfortably side by side with extremely sophisticated rationality.

But this is not at all surprising for Christians, since we know, as G K Chesterton remarked, that when people stop believing in God, they do not believe in nothing; rather, they will believe in anything. There is no vacuum for faith: our believing hearts will find something to hold on to, even if it is the most absurd and bizarre conceptions imaginable. So it is that sometimes extremely “rational” people hold to the most unbelievable superstitions. That this should be so is not surprising, as it is one of the long-exploded myths of 19<sup>th</sup> century rationalism that faith and rationality are polar opposites and that science and faith are incompatible. The famous assertion by the theologian Bultmann that people who believe in electricity and space travel cannot believe in miracles and demons is simply mistaken.

The passage we have had read to us this morning from Hebrews is one of the most well-known statements about faith in Scripture. In fact it is one of the few that actually spell out what faith entails. What it does not do is give us a definition of faith; rather, it states for us how faith works and what the outcome is for those who have faith, and it presupposes that this faith is faith in God. It is not a definition of faith for those who do not have faith and want to know what it is. No, it is a description of what true faith is like, and how it functions in the lives of God’s people. For as I have said, everyone has faith in something. The distinction is between those who have faith in the true God, and those who have placed their faith in a substitute for the true God, that is, in an idol. Anything that is purported to function as the source of meaning,

purpose and direction for life, is an idol, a godlet, a fake, a substitute. Modern life is full of such substitutes in which people place their faith, from which they seek meaning, purpose and direction for themselves and for their lives, either individually or communally.

So Hebrews 11 is not talking about faith as such; it is focusing specifically on what it means to have faith in God. Those who are faithless and unbelieving, in Biblical terms, are not people who are devoid of faith in any sense, but are devoid of faith in the true God, the only legitimate and worthy object of our faith. It speaks of faith in terms of the ability to see. This is why Hebrews 11 starts with the contrast between the seen and the unseen, the visible and the invisible. Faith is not focused on what we can see, but on what cannot be seen. But we must not make the mistake of seeing this contrast in terms of a dualism that owes more to pagan Greek speculation than to Christianity.

The tradition of thought through which the ancient Greeks have had a very powerful influence in Western culture has contrasted the seen and the unseen in terms of the inferior, material world which we experience daily, and the higher, spiritual world that lies above and beyond that which we can see. Faith, in that approach, focuses on the higher spiritual world that lies above, the world of miracles and mysteries, of God and the angels, of demons and spiritual powers of various kinds. Mystical approaches to understanding life make much of what lies hidden behind the gross, material world which we live in, and holds out the vision of a purer, better, more perfect world above and beyond, which we can see only by faith.

There is indeed a distinction between the world we can see around us, and the spiritual world of angels, of demonic forces, and of God, who cannot be seen by the human eye. But this does not mean a hierarchy of inferior, material things which can be seen by the physical eye, and superior, spiritual things which we cannot see in that way. The distinction is between that which we know by physical sight, and that which we know by spiritual sight, and that knowing is real knowing. The mistake of the Enlightenment rationalists was to claim that what can be seen and experienced provides real knowledge for us, while what cannot be seen and is experienced spiritually is not real knowledge, but imaginary, or illusion, or even delusion. But faith is not focused on illusions. Rather, it is the means whereby we gain real

knowledge of a reality that is not accessible to the physical senses. And it is knowledge, not imagination or delusion, as that which we know in faith is real, it is simply a different kind of reality that can be known only in that way. It is a way of knowing that provides real, genuine knowledge of an important aspect of reality that requires exercise of faith in order for it to be known.

When Hebrews 11 speaks of the distinction between the seen and the unseen, it is not based on a pagan Greek concept of a lower, material world accessible to our sight, and a higher, purer spiritual world which we cannot see with our eyes. No, the focus is on the distinction between what we can see now, and that which we cannot see because it has not yet happened. It is the contrast between the present reality, which may not reflect God's desires and intentions for us, and the future yet to come, in which God's desires and intentions for us have been accomplished and realized in our daily lives. We can pick up this focus from Hebrews quite clearly.

Noah built his ark, in response to a warning about things not yet seen: not something hidden from his normal sight, but something that had not yet happened, which when it did happen was a perfectly visible, everyday reality – but by then it was too late for those who had not had the faith to see it coming.

Abraham went out in faith, not knowing where he was going – he couldn't see his way ahead, he had to trust that God really was leading him to the land he couldn't see. It existed in his present reality, but he couldn't see it because he hadn't yet arrived there.

Abraham could not see the city that God was to build, but he could look forward to it and see it in faith, because it was not built in his lifetime, but was to be built in the future after he had died.

Isaac and Jacob were also heirs of the promise: they did not see it come about, but by their faith they contributed to the development of the people of God and thereby enabled God's work to be realized and for his redemptive purposes to be achieved. They saw this in the future, but did not live to take part in it themselves.

These people, Hebrews says, did not receive the things promised; they only saw them from a distance. They were looking for something yet to come. The heavenly country

they hoped for was not something above and beyond our daily reality, the invisible that lies above us that we are unable to see because it is pure and spiritual; no, it lies in front of us, in the future, which we are able to see only in faith because it has not yet become a reality in our daily lives. It is not a separate and distinct world we are unable to access: it is the promised future for this world that has not yet been made real for us, in part because of our lack of faith, and in part because of the timetable that God holds in his own power to ensure that his programme is fulfilled in his own time.

Do we have faith to look into the future, to see what God has promised for us, and to hold fast in faith to that and to work for what has yet to come into being? Can we commit ourselves to work to create a future we may not live to see achieved? Much of the difficulty that Christians have working in the world today is because of their short-sightedness. We have a tendency to plan and work for the two to three years at most. We are too easily captivated by the latest fad and the newest new thing. We need to see through and beyond the immediate, the pressing, the urgent and the pushy, to see the future that God holds out for us that is yet to come.

We need to capture the vision of God's kingdom a-coming and start thinking, working and praying for what is needed, not for the next two to three years, but for the next two to three **hundred** years, and to develop the skills, the people, the institutions, the programmes that will outlive us all and live on into the future for the benefit of generations yet to come. We are the heirs of the far-sightedness of many people in generations long gone, who could see the need to build what would last – not in terms of bricks and mortar, although that is important to some extent – but rather to build a culture, a society, a community, a people of faith in God, which will last beyond more than just our own generation. That such things should last is not for our own sake, or for the sake of the programme itself, but because by this means we can achieve something solid, something lasting, something significant that contributes to the ways of God in the world and achieves his purposes.

Christians are very prone to respond in reaction to developments and events that spring upon us, as in the debates about civil unions, or the legalization of prostitution, or same-sex marriage, and similar social changes of a disturbing nature. But where do we find the considered approach, the depth of research, the growing insight into the

way our society is developing, where we can find understanding and wisdom to guide us in how to act? This kind of resource cannot be developed and used in the time-frame of debates about social issues. When a debate about civil unions hits the front pages of the paper, it is too late to start thinking and researching and exploring the issues and the options so as to be able to present a considered and valuable opinion on the subject. By the time we get our act together, the issue has long gone and more pressing matters are upon us that also demand a response. As Martin Luther once said, Christians are very good at fighting hard in battles that have long ago been fought and won by the enemy who has since moved on to other battles and more victories.

We need to be prepared to fight the battles before they are upon us, by being ready with depth of insight, of wisdom, of understanding of the times, so we can respond appropriately and match the arguments of others with credibility and authority. This will not be achieved with short-sightedness, with focus on the present and by fighting on battles long since past. We need the vision and clarity which comes from faith in God, for it is only through faith in God that we can see, as Noah saw, the dreadful fate that was to come and to be prepared many years in advance to meet it.

We need the faith of Abraham who was promised an uncountable number of descendants, at a time when he was old and well beyond the age when he would be expected to have children. We need the faith of Moses, who could see the promised land ahead as the inheritance of his people, even though he had never been there and never actually got there, seeing it only at a distance with his eyes, but for many years before seeing it in faith as something yet to come. Do we have that kind of faith, to trust that what we do now will contribute to the growth and development of the kingdom of God in the years to come after we have all been long dead and gone? Where is our faith? Is it in what we can achieve with our own efforts and see with our eyes, or is it in God who takes what we do and uses it for his purposes, to bring about his kingdom, in years yet to come which we will not live to see? In faith, we can see his kingdom coming, because God has shown it to us and given us a foretaste of it in our lives together as believing people. Let us hold fast to our faith, not wavering in the face of scientific rationalism or irrational superstition, trusting in God for what we cannot see, which lies not above us in a mysterious hidden realm, but before us, in the promised future, the time yet to come, when God will achieve his purposes on earth,

and those who have had faith in him will be raised to live again and to enjoy the fruits of what they worked for even though it could not yet be seen. Let us that that God will enable us to be people of faith, people of vision, people of long sight looking forward to that which is yet to come.