

**Reflection for Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> August 2022 by Rev Steve Painting**  
**Genesis 15:1-6, Hebrews 11:1-3, Luke 12:32-40**

I wonder how you might define faith? People often speak about having or not having a faith. For me though faith falls somewhere between belief and trust and governs the way in which we live so I don't think it's about whether or not we have faith but about what we put our faith in. In our reading from Luke's Gospel, we find the line 'where your treasure is there your heart will be also.' The treasure that Luke refers to is in effect that which is our god. It is that in which we put our faith. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus speaks the same line and also adds, you cannot serve two masters. You cannot serve God and money. How do we serve money? By putting our faith in the accumulation of wealth, under the belief wealth is the thing that will give us what we need. Money in itself is not the problem. The problem is when money becomes our god and the location of our faith. Jesus recognises the risk of putting trust in the accumulation of material things. He knows that material possessions are perishable and unreliable, and so points to 'a purse that will not wear out.' This treasure is the kingdom of heaven which the Father has been pleased to give to those who follow Jesus. Through Jesus we have access to the ways of that kingdom, the ways that the Father himself has laid down by which people can live well. The difficulty for us humans is that the ways of the kingdom often look risky when compared with the ways of the world. Sell your possessions, says Jesus, and give to the poor. Do we have the faith to do that, or is our faith located in another place?

In chapter 11, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews urges his readers to put their faith in God, using examples of various Old Testament characters who have done just that. The particular section that we read today speaks of the faith of Abraham. It is a part of the Bible that has particular significance for me. In August 2001, my family and I moved away from our home near Portsmouth to go to Bristol, where I was to commence my training towards ordained ministry. Just before we moved, we had some friends round to pray for us. One of them suggested that Hebrews 11:8-10 might be verses relevant to us. The verses seemed strange at the time. Claire and I could relate to

Abraham in some ways, as we and our three children were, like him, stepping out into the unknown. We knew that Bristol was the first step but did not know where we were going beyond that. It was only later though that the true prophetic significance of the verses became clear. The Rectory at Heanton is the eighth different home that Claire and I have lived in since leaving Portsmouth. Many Vicars and their wives and husbands will tell you that a Rectory or Vicarage never feels like home. Vicarages (nice as they often are) are like Abraham's tents, temporary residences and dwellings, only home for as long as the Vicar stays in the job. The thing about prophecy, is that its fulfilment is often layered, some of it making sense at the time but other parts not until much later, often after many years. I am not telling this story as a testament to how wonderful my faith in God is. I am all too aware of how slow I often am to respond to God's direction and the times when I'm so distracted that I do not hear His call at all. The story does though illustrate how faith works. Neither Claire nor I would have chosen the path in life that resulted from me taking on ordained ministry. We could of course have done a Jonah and gone as far as possible in the opposite direction, but then again look at the mess that Jonah got into. That is, I guess, the essence of faith in God. The conviction that the way He reveals to us, is the safest option, even if in a worldly sense it seems risky or foolish. We went the way we felt God was directing, mainly because we didn't like the prospect of an alternative, which could have been akin to getting caught up in a shipwreck and spending three days inside a big fish.

There are two slightly different aspects to living by faith in God. The first involves putting our trust in the general principles taught by Jesus and also made known in other parts of the Bible. This has its challenges. Living by the principles of the ten commandments for example, is often in conflict to the pull towards self-protection and self-actualisation. Loving our enemies is potentially risky. Loving others as Christ loves us, involves personal sacrifice. Living rightly then demands faith and here a verse from the Old Testament reading makes sense, 'Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness' (Genesis 15:6). Only the power of our faith in the rightness of God's principles enables us to make the choice to live by them. We must be

careful though to avoid the mistake of the Pharisees, whose faith in principles became too legalistic. Principles are flexible and take into account different circumstances and contexts. Laws, rules and regulations are unbending. When we are bound by rules our faith is located in a religious system rather than in God himself. The system has become just another false god. Which brings me to second element to faith, which is more personal and specific. There are things that God will ask of me that he won't ask of others and vice versa. It takes faith not just in God's existence and a moral code but faith in God's specific call to us as individuals. This then is where my story and Abram's story both become relevant. It was not because of a general moral principle that Abram left his home or moved his tents from place to place, but a belief that this was what God was calling him and his family to do. It was the same for us prior to 2001 when Claire and I made the decision that God was asking me to pursue a calling into ordained ministry and the same again in the years since when we have moved into new areas and new situations. Another tent in another city. I think I should stress here that we have not moved on without caution. In some ways, neither Claire nor I are great risk takers. We have therefore always sought clarification of what we have felt to be God's call, in order to be as confident as we can be that it is God behind our moves and not our own flights of fancy. When all is said and done though, there is never complete certainty. As the writer to the Hebrews says, 'faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.' Faith would not be faith if there was certainty, and it is faith that is required if we are going to follow Jesus. In spite of encouraging words of prophesy, we do not see the end point until the end point. Only then is it possible to see that our faith was justified. The prophetic words given by my friend have after 20 years confirmed for us, that God was behind all that has taken place but we have had to take several significant steps of faith before that confirmation came. God does give us confirmation to strengthen our trust in him but we should be mindful that we will never in this age see our faith justified completely. The end point that we truly hope for, the rest and the home in which we truly belong cannot be found in this world. For Claire and me, one of the biggest sacrifices we have made in seeking to follow God's call, is that we have not stayed anywhere long enough to truly call home or find a place

where we feel fully settled and have a complete sense of belonging. The words from Hebrews remind us that Abraham was in faith, waiting for a home that he knew was not accessible to him in his earthly existence. 'He was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.' In the end, nothing in this age is permanent. Our true home will be reached in the age to come.

Until then we are to live by faith, trusting in the principles of God and his direction for each of us personally. Going back to our reading from Luke's gospel, Jesus warns his hearers to be ready. He uses a parable of servants whose master is away. The master has given them instructions to be dressed for service while he is gone in order to be ready for his return. Which takes us back to where we started. Serving God is dependent upon where our faith is located. It is about living in the belief that he is the master, but also knowing that he is a good and loving master who will never ask us to do anything that is not in our best interests. Living according to his direction requires courage to step into the risky or unknown, yet when we do so, we find that God is faithful and trustworthy, we are safe in his hands and our faith is increased. I've met many people who say 'I wish I had faith' or 'I wish I could believe'. The thing is though that such belief doesn't invariably just come. Someone once said if you want to know it's all true, you first have to live as though it is true. There is a great deal of wisdom in this. If we want faith, we first have to take small steps of faith.