

Online Reflection for 14th August 2022, the 9th Sunday after Trinity

Luke 12:49-56 and Hebrews 11:29-12:2

On September 14, 1860, Charles Blondin became the first person to cross a tightrope stretched 11,000 feet (over a quarter of a mile) across Niagara Falls. People from both Canada and America came from miles away to see this great feat. He walked across, 160 feet above the falls, several times... each time with a different daring feat - once in a sack, on stilts, on a bicycle, in the dark, and blindfolded. One time he even carried a stove and cooked an omelette in the middle of the rope!

Then Blondin suddenly stopped and addressed his audience: "Do you believe I can carry a person across in this wheelbarrow?"

The crowd enthusiastically yelled, "Yes! You are the greatest tightrope walker in the world. We believe!"

"Very well," said Blondin, "Who wants to get into the wheelbarrow?"

And at that point the crowd went very quiet...

It's a well-known story because it makes a good point about what faith is. Faith isn't just shouting along with the crowd that you believe something. Faith is about being prepared to act on that belief. It's being prepared to put your trust in someone for real. An example from my own life would be a few years ago when I was part of a small group of kayakers who had to be rescued by the RNLI off the coast of North Devon. After 60 km and 12 hours of paddling I was exhausted and suffering from hypothermia, and even though the last thing I felt able to do was to let go of my kayak and follow the lifeboat crew to safety I knew I could trust their training, their experience and their commitment to getting us to safety. I could trust them too because I knew I had no resources of my own left: the lifeboat was my best hope of safety.

Hebrews, our epistle this morning, however, takes faith a stage further. The letter was probably written in the last third of the first century to encourage Christians, possibly in Rome, who were finding it hard to keep going in the face of persecution, public pressure and ridicule. The writer uses all sorts of elaborate literary techniques to warn, encourage and inspire his audience. In our reading, he reminds them of everything that the heroes of the Old Testament had accomplished by faith – crossing the Red Sea in the escape from Egypt, conquering Jericho, ruling kingdoms, seeing miracles and being delivered from terrible dangers. For a moment it seems that faith is being presented as the way to a victorious and triumphant life, that faith is the key to success.

It's very tempting for the church to go along with this. When I talk to people to commend the Christian faith, I want to make trusting God sound attractive and life-enhancing. 'Becoming a Christian will give you peace; becoming a Christian will help you find purpose and meaning; becoming a Christian will improve your relationships' and so on. It's quite a common temptation, and it can take some unusual forms. When I was in Uganda a few years ago, I was very struck by the extent to which Christian language and imagery was absolutely everywhere, including on many businesses: 'The Good Shepherd Hair Salon', 'Mount Zion Garage', 'Lamb of God family stores.' Many Christian converts in Uganda experience a dramatic change in lifestyle, freedom from crime and alcoholism and so on, and like to express their new life by dressing very smartly with impeccable jackets and immense ties. The message from billboards and converts alike is clear: Christian faith leads to prosperity and success.

There is obviously much to commend this. I've seen for myself the difference trusting God makes in people's lives; and accompanying people in that discovery is one of the greatest things about being a priest. It reminds me that we have every right to proclaim that Jesus Christ does indeed make a

difference in our lives and that this is good news. But we need to be careful in our enthusiasm to tell the whole story, the whole truth. Faith in Jesus is not itself a short-cut to success. Christianity does not promise us an easy life or a comfortable life. Jesus himself came as someone once said, 'to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable'. Faith is not just a fuzzy feeling; faith is for hard times too.

This is what the author of Hebrews wants us to realize. After that list of Old Testament heroes, the author goes on to relate the sometimes gruesome fates of many of those heroes of faith. Ridicule, imprisonment, torture and execution, homelessness and hunger. All things, it's worth noting that Christians in Uganda knew only too well under Idi Amin. These things, too, come as a result of our faith, says the writer of Hebrews. Faith is no easy ride: in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words, we are not to look for 'cheap grace'.

In our gospel reading today Jesus says much the same thing: 'I have not come to bring peace but a sword'. As he sets his face towards Jerusalem, with a pretty good idea of the death that awaits him there, Jesus warns his hearers that his message will bring division. We are so used to thinking of Jesus as prince of peace, that to think of him bringing division is difficult. But Jesus came with a message that demanded a decision. And decisions provoke divisions. Jesus didn't come saying 'remember to be nice'. He didn't come saying 'be well-behaved'. He came saying 'love your enemies'. He came saying 'you cannot serve two masters'. He came, saying 'only through the narrow door'. He came saying 'follow me'. The forgiveness that Jesus came preaching was freely-given – but it cost him everything. The grace of God in Christ is free – but never cheap.

None of this sounds particularly encouraging to us by itself. But both Jesus and the author of Hebrews go on to encourage us by telling us to look at the

bigger picture – if you like, to have a faith that is three-dimensional, that is based on the past, present and future.

For a start, both Jesus and the author of Hebrews, based their faith partly on looking back. Hebrews describes the faith of heroes of old in their triumphs and tribulations. Jesus founds his ministry on the message of the Jewish scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, quoting often from the prophets or Moses. In the same way our 21st century faith depends on what we believe about the historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth, on what he did in Palestine and on what happened on that first Easter somewhere around 33AD. We look back, and we trust the testimony of those first witnesses to Jesus. Because of what they recorded, we believe. Our faith is founded partly on history – his story. Looking back is the first dimension of faith. We can trust God because of what God has done in the past.

But faith that is only about looking back is very one-dimensional: that quickly becomes at best nostalgia, at worst fossilised. Living faith is about here and now, in what is happening in our daily lives in the messy and complicated real world. The here-and-now is the second dimension of our faith: we begin to realise that not only did Christ die for us but that he also lives for us. This is vital if our faith is to be living and active, but I think it's also something that we find very difficult. For example, if I were to ask you to look back over the last week or so and tell me where you had seen Jesus Christ at work in your life, you might find it hard to answer. So how can we begin to learn how to pay attention to the God-ward side of the situations we find ourselves in each day?

One way might be to ask ourselves where in our lives this week we have seen evidence of some of the big themes of God's story: justice, forgiveness, salvation, wholeness, healing, community, righteousness? We might look back on our day and ask ourselves if we have noticed times when we've felt

close to God, or times when we've felt far away? We can ask ourselves what decisions we might have made, and how have they might have affected our walk with God. We might think about how things that have happened in the day have made us feel, and use that as the start of a prayer. Many people have found this sort of daily self-examination to be very helpful, and after all, Jesus challenges us to do something very similar in our gospel today when he talks about 'reading the signs of the times'. 'As good farmers, you can read the signs of the Mediterranean weather', he tells the crowd, 'But you don't seem able to judge the signs of the present time – you don't seem able to recognise what God is doing in front of your faces'. So, in faith, why not try to examine your days, next week and see if you get a sense of the God-ward side of each situation. That's the vital second dimension of faith.

If the past is the first and the present the second dimension of faith, then the future is the third. We can hesitate to make too much of Christ's promise to come again and God's promise of a new heaven and a new earth. We hesitate because of the many, many failed attempts by misguided Christians and unscrupulous charlatans to provide a date and a time. The latest well-known date was May 21, 2011 and I'm pretty sure it was wrong! But we cannot get away from the fact that we are not only told the start of the story in the Bible, we are given a picture of its ending and it is the best ending. As Hebrews reminds us, we have already received a taste of this future hope in the here and now, but its fulfilment is still before us. We are to follow Jesus 'who for the joy set before him, endured the Cross'. That is the faith of the 'great cloud of witnesses' who surround us: the promise of ultimate joy, ultimate justice, ultimate reconciliation with the God who will wipe every tear from our eyes. We have faith in the joy set before us.

Despite the popular misconceptions, this faith is not blind. Faith in the crucified Jesus keeps our eyes open to the pain of the real world and our own frailties and limitations. But faith in the risen Jesus gives us hope and trust

that life, not death will have the final word. And our faith in the living Jesus helps us to see God's redeeming love at work in the world and challenges us to put our trust in someone for real. It's in doing so that we become the people we have been created to be. And we do so humbly and hopefully, for as Jesus says, even if our faith is as small as a mustard seed, nothing will be impossible.

-Rev'd Phil