

Sermon for Trinity 8: Faith or Reason?

Hebrews 11, 1-3 and 8-16

1 Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

2 This is what the ancients were commended for.

3 By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

8 By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

9 By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.

10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

11 By faith Abraham, even though he was past age— and Sarah herself was barren— was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise.

12 And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

13 All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.

14 People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own.

15 If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return.

16 Instead, they were longing for a better country— a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Luke 12

32 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. 33 Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. 34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

35 'Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, 36 like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. 37 It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will dress himself to serve, will make them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. 38 It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the middle of the night or towards daybreak. 39 But understand this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. 40 You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.'

Introduction to the service.

Do not be afraid little flock! In the gospels Jesus often tells us to not be afraid, as he does in today's. In our first reading we hear of faith, so live in faith not in fear. Church is a good place to top up your faith so you don't run dry.

Sermon.

Are you a person of faith?

I came across the following definition of faith by Richard Dawkins, the radical atheist and author of 'The God Delusion', he writes,

'Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence.'

According to Dawkins, one is either a person of faith, or a person of reason, and he leaves us in no doubt as to which type of person he thinks he is, but which are you, are you a person of faith or of reason?

I confess I must be a person of faith since there are many things I believe without having seriously examined the evidence. For instance, I have accepted the creation account given me by my culture without any serious investigation of the facts, I just believe what the scientists say. I can't do the maths, I don't have a telescope powerful enough to see distant galaxies, I just believe what I'm told about the Big Bang. I have never seen a 'quark' or a subatomic particle but I have faith that they exist. For that matter, I have never seen gravity or time, but I firmly believe in them.

If I take these things on faith at least I can take comfort from men of faith from history who have gone on to achieve great things.

By faith Columbus set sail across the vast uncharted ocean trusting that the world would not prove to have a precipitous edge.

By faith Galileo pointed his telescope at the stars trusting the truth of what he saw would stand against the dogma that the Church authorities taught.

By faith Isaac Newton expressed motion as a universal law, even though he couldn't be present to observe every motion of the universe.

By faith Darwin set forth for the Galapagos Islands to record the diversity of nature trusting it would inform his theories, and overturn the scientific consensus.

By faith Einstein described phenomena that would one day be shown to be true by experimental physics.

As Einstein wrote,

"The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of all true art and science....To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is something that our minds cannot grasp, whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly: this is religiousness. In this sense... I am a devoutly religious man."

If I am a man of faith I am in good company.

People of faith reach out into the unknown in the belief that the unknown may respond.

By Dawkin's definition, however, the former Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright, seems to be a man of reason, not of faith.

In his book, 'Surprised by Hope' Tom Wright after evaluating all the evidence concludes that only the actual bodily resurrection of Jesus can explain the rise and character of early Christianity. He writes,

'I and others have studied quite extensively all the alternative explanations, ancient and modern, for the rise of the early church and the shape of its belief. Far and away the best historical explanation is that Jesus... having been thoroughly dead and buried, really was raised to life on the third day with a renewed body.'

He is not the only cleric I have met to investigate the world through reason, the Revd Professor David Wilkinson, the Principal of St John's College, Durham, where I studied theology, holds PhDs in both theoretical astrophysics and systematic theology. He is clearly a man of reason who evaluates evidence.

The Vicar of the church I attended in my youth, the Rev'd Canon Roger Morgan, studied Maths at Oxford, he then became Director of Studies in Mathematics at Cambridge, and having applied Mathematics to Management studies was consulted by government departments and large companies, but after assessing all the evidence he became convinced of the truth of Christianity, and went into the Church.

A Bishop of Durham who evaluates evidence, a theoretical astrophysicist teaching theology, and a Vicar who was an Oxford educated Mathematician.

Could it be that being human requires the application of both faith and reason?

There's a saying I like, 'reason is my right hand and faith my left'.

We need both hands to engage with the world.

We have made faith religious when it is human.

None of us know what's around the corner, but we proceed in faith based on past evidence. Just around the corner a lunatic lorry driver may be hurtling his wagon down the wrong side of the road, we don't know for sure, but on the evidence of past experience we think it unlikely and so proceed.

In our reading from Hebrews we heard that 'faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.'

Certainty?

Only God can be certain.

The King James Version translates that as "evidence of things not seen". In this case I think the King James Version is correct, the Greek word "elenchos" is closer to "evidence" than "certainty." Faith requires you look at the evidence.

Beware the certainty-mungers, people who proclaim either faith or reason as absolute proof of their beliefs, we need both faith and reason, and we need the humility that comes with recognising our frailty as human beings.

I once heard a wonderful illustration of faith in a sermon preached by a Reader.

To understand the story you need to know that this Reader was a larger man of mature years, I'm sure he would not mind me telling you that as his ungainly frame was a feature of the story.

He had been camping for the weekend in Derbyshire with his son, and they were now walking back down a long and winding county lane that brought them off the hills and within sight of the railway station.

It was at this point that they saw the train approaching, the last train home.

All seemed lost but then a figure of a young man shot by running at speed, and cried, 'run, I will hold the train for you!'

They both broke into a run, with camping equipment swinging about them, our Reader huffed and puffed and went red in the face, but still ran on.

As they got into the town the station disappeared from sight, but as they rounded the ticket office there it was, the train waiting on the platform with the young and swift youth who had charged ahead standing by the engine.

Now, the Reader pointed out, he had no way of knowing if the young man would be as good as his word, or if he would be swift enough, or indeed if the train driver would listen to him. The Reader acted out of faith based on the limited evidence he had.

If the Reader had not believed he would not have caught the train, and if he had believed but not run he would have gained nothing.

I like the story because it is a simple illustration of faith, but also because that young man who saved them reminds me of Jesus.

Jesus travelled our road, he asked us to follow and trust him, and he went on ahead of us to save us a place. Without him we miss the train to salvation in this world and the next.

Faith is not a great cop-out, or an excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence, neither is it 'belief in spite of...the lack of evidence.' Faith requires that you opt in; faith demands that you think, and evaluate evidence. Faith requires you wrestle with uncertainty. Faith is a part of what makes us human, and faith is the divine gift that enables us to reach out to receive God's grace.

So have faith and as Jesus said, "do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom."

Amen.

I came across this poem in a collection of The Metaphysical Poets this week, it sums up my sermon rather well, to the extent that I thought of reading it out instead. However, in the end I just explained all this in the notices and gave everyone a copy to take home.

Our senses without Reason, are nought worth;

Nor Reason, unless Faith doe set it forth:

Neither is Faith without Love to be deemed;

Nor is love without God to be esteemed.

Robert Hayman (1579 - 1631)