

Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16 – The Look of Faith

Prayer

We're all different – obviously – and one of the differences between people is the way we prefer to think. Some of us are very comfortable with ideas and concepts, definitions and abstractions. Others of us are much more comfortable with stories and like to do our thinking by telling and hearing stories. I'm sure Anna will tell you and you have probably worked it out if you have heard us preach once or twice that I am more of the former – ideas guy – whereas she prefers the stories. I suspect I am in the minority, but heigh-ho, you've got me this morning...

Why I say this is because our reading this morning from Hebrews 11 falls into two parts that between them cover both bases. Both parts are looking at Faith in different ways. Verse 1 begins with something that is very rare indeed in the Bible – a definition. Let me know if you can think of any other clear definitions anywhere in the Bible. But we have one here – *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*. For this writer – because this book called Hebrews is anonymous – he (more likely than *she* in the ancient world) gives an example from the created world – that what we can see all around us – wood, stones, other people – it's all made up from what we cannot see. Yes, they knew about atoms in the ancient world, not in the same scientific way that we understand today but some at least knew there was much more to the world than what we can see. So if you like thinking in ideas then think of Faith in terms of getting what is outside your immediate experience.

Now before the eyes glaze over, the second part of our reading also looks at Faith but not in that kind of abstract way. We have story of what faith looks like. Verse 8 – *by faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going*. Just that reminds me of the summer of 1989 when we boarded the plane for Uganda with one-way tickets – David was 6 and Andrew 4 – neither my wife nor I had been outside of Europe, and in fact this was the first time I had been on a plane. And we were going into the unknown – for us anyway; it would be three years before we returned and then we would go back after a few months leave for a second spell of three years. We believed God was calling us and we went in obedience to that call. Maybe this story makes you think of an occasion or maybe many occasions when you stepped out in faith in obedience to God's call to you.

Back to Abraham – as an example of faith in action. Abraham left – with his family and all the possessions they could take, most of them with four legs. He left his place in Ur, in what we now call Iraq – near Basra. This was his place; it was where he belonged. This was where he had his identity. For many people then and now, a sense of identity and belonging is very much rooted in a particular place. Ask yourself – are you someone like that? Or are you what some have called an *Anywhere* – you have lived in different places and your roots where you are now are quite shallow. We're quite happy in Chepstow but we're not deeply rooted there – or anywhere. That's fine, because I really appreciate the phrase in verse 13 where the writer takes his cue from Abraham and looks beyond to those who consider themselves *strangers and foreigners on the earth*, because they are *seeking a homeland*. They are looking for what God is preparing for them – our passage ends with this – *a city for them*. Paul put this very clearly in his letter to the Philippians at the end of chapter three – *our citizenship is in heaven*. Heaven is where God is; heaven is where Jesus is – the one who has overcome death and is there praying for us. It is one of the great Biblical themes from the earliest times, the story of Abraham, that our identity, who we are, is not where we are from, is not where

we live, where we consider home, who we consider our people to be. It's not our tradition, our culture, our country, our parish, our family – our fundamental identity is in Jesus Christ, to be a son or daughter of God. That's what faith is – hanging on to and believing that.

So, looking at this story of Abraham, what does it mean for us to move forward in faith? Let me suggest a couple of pointers and questions:

- It means living loose to the things of this world. In last week's reading from Luke we heard Jesus remind us that *one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions*. In this week's Gospel reading Jesus says, *sell your possessions and give alms... for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*. We can all do with just listening to these words and decide for ourselves what they mean in practice.
- But it isn't just possessions that Jesus is talking about and this writer of Hebrews. It's our sense of identity. We live in a world of increasing nationalism and xenophobia – wag the flag because we're the best. But I have brothers and sisters in Christ all round the world. I've been in close contact this week with a friend in Tanzania – just one example.

And maybe these points prompt us to ask the question here in T... what is God calling us to leave behind? Not because it's bad, because if it is bad, God is certainly calling us to leave it behind. But what is hindering us from moving forward into the future that God is holding out to us? What are we fearful of letting go? I love that line in the children's poem by Hilaire Belloc – *and always keep a hold of nurse – for fear of finding something worse*.

Abraham moved because he was confident in the God who called him onwards. Are we confident in the God who holds the future of T...? Be confident in your identity in Jesus Christ. Trust him and be bold to step forward even though the future is unknown – for us as individuals, families and together. We began by thinking of the way that we have different preferences in our thinking. Right at the beginning of Hebrews 11 the writer contrasts for us moving forward by sight – into the predictable and the controlled... and walking by faith – *the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*. Then he showed us what it meant for Abraham – moving out of Ur and into the big unknown. Abraham never really got there – he was always on the move. That was Abraham – but what about you and me? What does faith look like in your life and mine? It's faith that says, *Lord, not what I want but what you want – show us Lord and make us willing to obey*.

Sometimes I might ask someone – *How are you?* And the answer comes back *getting there*. I always want to follow up – where is the *there* you getting? But there is something in that answer – we are always moving towards... and until we get to heaven we are always on the journey – *getting there* – but at least we can know where *there* is.

Prayer

Absolution

May God who loved the world so much
that he sent his Son to be our Saviour,
forgive us our sins,
and make us holy to serve him in the world,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Blessing

May God the Father bring us to the home
which his Son prepares for all who love him;
may God the Son give us the will
to live for him each day in life eternal;
may God the Holy Spirit give us the assurance
that our citizenship is in heaven;
and the blessing...