

Sunday 11 August, 2019

The first in a series of sermons on St Paul's letter to the Hebrews, given by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe.

The epistle to the Hebrews, which we will be following over the next month, tells us the story of the world as seen through the eyes of faith. 'Faith is the assurance of things hoped for', the writer tells us at the beginning of our second reading (Hebrews 11.1-3, 9-16). Faith is the precursor for living in relationship with God, the writer to the Hebrews tells us (in the verses skipped by today's reading), because 'without faith it is impossible to please God'. Unless we believe in God, the writer explains, we cannot be in a relationship with him: 'For whoever would approach God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him'.

Faith, for the writer of Hebrews, is not merely a virtue. Nor is it merely a practice for holy people. Rather, faith is a present and continuing reality. For our writer faith is a way of life that opens our eyes to the reality what it means to be in relationship with God. It gives us a reference point for where we have come from, and points us to where we will be going. Faith tells us how the world came into being, and infuses our hearts with longing for the world to come. Faith enables us to unlock the mystery of how 'the worlds were prepared by the word of God', our writer tells at the outset of our reading (11.2), and instils in us a profound longing for our permanent homeland: 'a better country, that is a heavenly one', which God has prepared for all who share this faith and longing (11.16). And faith gives us the means of sustaining this longing, and finally to enter the city made by God.

For the author of Hebrews, the world around us may be beautiful, mysterious, even stupendous. But on its own without the benefit of faith, even the universe is not sufficient to account for itself, to unlock its mysteries. Rather, it is faith, not something material, that assures us that the world, and all its wonders, are a gift to us, made by God. This world is God's world, and only faith can assure us that God made it and keeps it in being. The test of faith is not that of our senses, but rather the test of the heart, the writer of Hebrews tells. Only faith can make sense of God's world and the purpose of our lives. Faith is the foundation of all that a God-centred life means. Faith is all that people who love God hope for.

And that is why the words 'by faith' run through this morning's reading like a beacon of light. Most of our second reading is a compelling testimony of what the heroes of our faith accomplished, because they *had faith*. The great women and men of faith, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, were ready to be guided by God we read in our second lesson. They trusted that God would lead them from their current setting, and circumstances, to a new and better reality. It was because of his faith that 'Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place' yet unknown to him (11.8). It was because of her faith, that Sarah conceived and gave birth to a son, Isaac. It was by faith that Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac and his descendants, accepted the privation of an unsettled life, 'living in the land he had been promised as in a foreign land' (11.9).

Life *with* faith, the writer of Hebrews suggests, is a life of longing for God. It is a life that is lived transiently, a life lived waiting for a better and greater reality. It is life lived as people looking for their true place of belonging. Our reading puts it in this way: the heroes of our faith 'confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on earth ... seeking a homeland' (11.13-15). They were not displaced people or refugees, in that they did not seek to return to a place that once was home for them: 'if they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind', the writer asserts, 'they would have had the opportunity to return' (11.15). The heroes of our faith were not nostalgically or practically longing for a past home. They actively sought for God's kingdom, desired a better country: the place where God reigns. Their faith compelled them to keep looking for God's kingdom.

God rewards such faith-filled looking and longing, our reading tells us: 'therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them'. And the process of this longing *in faith* for God's reign to come, and actively to strive for the values of that reign to be brought about in our own generation, is what the writer of Hebrews described earlier in the letter as 'having God's laws in our minds, written in our hearts' (8.10). The way in which we may come to know who God is *is through faith*. The way in which we may please God is through our faith. The way in which God will be our God, and we his people, is through faith. As the writer of our epistle put it earlier in the letter: if people have faith all people will know God - 'all shall know me', God assures us, 'from the greatest to the least' (8.11-12).

The key to knowing God is faith, and the key to faith is knowing Jesus Christ, the writer of Hebrews tells. Jesus is the ultimate hero of our faith. Where in today's second reading, God is described as 'not ashamed to be called the God' of those who have faith, earlier in the letter Jesus is described as 'not ashamed to be called *brother*' of those who are sanctified (2.11). Jesus, then, is the way in which we may experience God, come to have faith in God, and be numbered among his children, his family, our letter tells. He is the 'reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of his being' (1.3). Just as he is the way in which we may be made right before God. He is the 'sacrifice for atonement for the sins of the people' (2.17). And so, when we see Jesus, we see God. And when God sees Jesus, he sees us. He sees our sins set right by Jesus' death on a cross, and us washed clean by the shedding of Jesus' blood.

At the beginning of the letter to the Hebrews, the writer calls Jesus the '*pioneer* of our faith' (2.10). Jesus is the most perfect example of faith-filled living, embodying the qualities and creative power of God himself. Jesus lives a life of sacrifice and suffering, so that he might 'help those who are being tested' (2.18). He gives up his life freely so that he might 'free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death' (2.15). By the end of the letter, Jesus is described as 'the pioneer *and perfecter* of our faith' (12.2). He has accomplished all, 'enduring the cross ... and has taken his seat at the right hand of God' (12.2). For those who believe in Jesus, between those two counterpoints stands life in the land of faith: life in the land of longing for God's city.

This life in the land of faith and active longing and working for the rule of God may well entail suffering, our letter tells us. As people of faith, we may well be living as if we were 'strangers and foreigners on earth seeking a permanent homeland' (11.14). In the final chapter of his letter, the writer explains what living as if we were strangers on earth looking actively for the signs of God's rule may mean for us. We may be called to share in the kinds of sufferings that Jesus endured, may be called to share in the same rejection that he experienced. We may be asked to 'bear the abuse Jesus endured', until we reach 'the city that is to come' (13.13-14). This suffering is neither senseless suffering, nor is it lonely suffering. Because Jesus himself 'was tested by what he suffered, in order to help those who are being tested' the suffering we endure, is never random or without purpose (2.18). Indeed, by 'sanctifying the people by his own blood' (13.2), Jesus has already opened for us a way of life that will enable us embrace suffering. A way of life that will resource us to carry on looking for the city that has foundations, the place whose architect is the Father, and whose builder is the Son.

For me, the epistle to the Hebrews is among the most poetic texts in the New Testament. And one of the reasons why the writer of our epistle makes use of so many images, all rich and complex in combination, I think, is to afford us a glimpse of the place of that heavenly city prepared by God. That place where suffering is no more and our life of faith-filled longing fulfilled. I believe that the writer intends to invite us, here and now in Melbourne, in the twenty-first century, to enter in the imagination of our faith the place where Jesus 'has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God' (12.2). Through the words of our epistle you and I are invited, here and now, to recognise that we all have a place where Jesus is because of what Jesus accomplished for us on the cross twenty-one centuries ago. We are all encouraged, with every part of our self-understanding, to strive to inhabit that place, to strive to make it our own through our faith-filled actions.

This pilgrimage of faith to the place where Jesus is not just a welcome reverie to be indulged in our worship, or something that should be left to our reverent singing of hymns about fighting the good fight or being a pilgrim. The wisdom contained in the pages of the epistle to the Hebrews is nothing other than the story of our salvation, expressed through the actions of faith. That Faith is, as it were, a passport for those of us who believe in God and long for his presence. That faith is a travel document to the place where God dwells, instilling in us hope and yearning. That faith will sustain us on the journey to that place where we can gaze on Jesus ourselves, 'the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and now has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God' (12.2). Now that surely is faith worth putting our trust in.

Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen (Hebrews 13.20).