

SERMON Revd Eileen Harrop 14th August 2016 (WINSTON AND GAINFORD HC)  
Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:29-56

Kindle in us your holy fire and raise to ashes all that hinders faith. AMEN

The whole of Hebrews chapter 11, of which we heard a part, draws attention to faith. The author of this letter lists Biblical characters who by faith became participants of astonishing outcomes. Their faith moved mountains - things happened in their favour that should not have been possible.

The author remarked that he had so many examples there wouldn't be enough time to tell them all. "For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness..." and so on.

This is the definition in Hebrews 11: "To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see". Being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we cannot see, is not 'blind faith'.

When Moses parted the Red Sea and asked the Israelites to walk through it with him, he and they did so having experienced God's protection from the plagues which afflicted Pharaoh's people. Each of those people listed in Hebrews had a personal relationship or encounter with God. They were confident in their knowledge of Him.

But do you regard such wonders as being long past; as wonders limited to Biblical times? Might you be among those who believe that that sort of personal relationship with God disappeared with the early church and is His rare gift only to special people? Such faith has been alive throughout every generation among ordinary people in all parts of the world. I met a 95 year-old man of faith this past week. He was eager to tell me about the many things that amazed him in his life. He had tears in his eyes as he recounted his blessings and gave thanks to God. He is not unlike some of you here: pleasant, jocund, elderly, interesting and interested. I might not have known of his relationship with God, his love of Jesus through faithful prayer and study of the Bible, just by looking at him. But as he shared his personal history I realised that here was Hebrews chapter 11 alive, adapted and retold today.

I shall refer to him as Richard. His history was not dramatic as David slaying Goliath, but Richard knew that it was by faith that his mother and her 3 young children flourished despite living on 21 shillings a week (or as he said, equivalent today of £1 a week) when his father died. As the only boy, he began work on the mines at 14. A year later, he found himself drawn to attend a Methodist mission service. He happened to be seated by a man who asked him afterwards, "what would you do if I gave you 10 shillings now?" Richard answered without any hesitation, "I'll get myself a good Bible to study with". The man gave Richard the 10 shillings and there it was before me: his Bible – one of those soft black leather ones, and on the inside was his name and the date. Now worn and faded, it contains many passages underlined in ink with notes alongside. From his modest youth, by faith he committed his hopes to God. He was singled out to train as a mining engineer and surveyor, and later assigned to India and further east where he shared his faith with Muslims and Hindus, and lived peaceably with them.

Faith is a uniquely poignant phenomenon.

I recall my father seeking his father's consolation when he felt his best friend had let him down badly. My grandfather kindly told his son that he was the one blest: he knew God and recognised wrong-doing. Indeed, this best friend had made known to everyone his unbelief in God. My grandfather asked my father to pray in faith for his friend's deliverance. Almost 20 years later, as I watched this friend stand beside my grandfather's open

coffin to pay his last respects (as is our custom in Singapore), I knew I was witnessing an inexplicable turning point in his life. From that day onwards, he and his wife, and thereafter all his family, found personal faith in Christ.

But the reward for faith is not always known to us in our earthly life-time. Our Hebrews passage tells us that some “were tortured... Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death... (made) destitute, persecuted, tormented...” and so on. For these faithful people, God had known through their relationship with Him that they would not deny the Gospel of Christ even at risk of their lives. Their particular testimonies would be a blessing to many at the cost of their comfort, honour, safety and lives in this world.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus warned about having faith. He confesses:

“I came to set the earth on fire... Do you suppose that I came to bring peace to the world? No, not peace, but division. From now on a family of five will be divided, three against two and two against three. Fathers will be against their sons, and sons against their fathers; mothers will be against their daughters, and daughters against their mothers” and so on.

People with faith are on fire with the Holy Spirit. Like the disciples on the day of Pentecost, Richard is filled with the Holy Spirit. His passion for the Gospel has grown with his deepening relationship with Jesus. But like some of us here, his family is for the time being divided. Some do not share his faith.

But God’s Word is good: The Bible assures us of God’s goodness even in this most testing situation. Trust in the Lord; He is faithful. He loves those we love more than we ever could. Hope in Him; have faith. Amen.