

St Botolph's Church Worthing
7 August 2016
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
Reverend Roger Walker

If we were asked to define faith we would probably find it fairly difficult the sort of thing we might say would be 'believing in something', which does not get us much further forwards. So I have always been impressed with the definition of faith in Hebrews (our second reading) where we read 'faith is the assurance of things hoped for – the absolute certainty of things not seen'. That says it all, doesn't it, bearing in mind that in biblical terms the word 'hope' is a type of shorthand for eternal life.

Our faith means that we are sure of our eternal life with God – and we are completely certain of his existence and of the whole spiritual realm. Does that define your faith? Can you answer an unequivocal 'Yes' to each of these three questions?

'Do you believe in God?' That's the simplest one
'Do you believe there is a heavenly realm of angels and saints?' That may take a bit more thinking about
Do you believe that you will share eternal life with God? It's amazing how many people who call themselves Christians cannot give a confident Yes to this question.

Each of these, however, is an essential part of the Christian faith and we need to strengthen our ability to answer a confident Yes to each of these questions. In fact, if you think about it, we are answering Yes every Sunday morning when we say the Creed. We recite 'We believe in one God, the Father, the almighty' – that's the Yes to question one. We continue 'maker of heaven and earth and of all that is, seen and unseen' – that's the Yes to question two. And finally, 'we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.' – Yes to question three.

As you say those words this morning, think consciously about whether this is something you truly believe. If you have difficulty doing this, you can talk to me afterwards about the bits that make you hesitate.

Our Reading, however, goes on to show us that faith is not just something that we believe with our own minds or speak out with our voice. For Hebrews goes on to show us the result of Abraham's faith. Abraham had lived much of his life in Hara. His father, Terah, had lived in Ur, a town in southern Iraq. God called on him to go to the land of Canaan. He set off, but when he reached the prosperous town of Haran in northern Iraq he decided to go no further and he no doubt had a comfortable life there. When Terah died – aged 205, according to the Book of Genesis – God spoke to Abraham and told him to continue his father's journey. His faith was such that he obeyed God and left the comfortable life in Haran to go to the land of Canaan where he lived a very different life as a nomad. He had taken his nephew Lot with him because he and his wife Sarah had no children. God promised him that

he would have a son from whom 'descendants numerous as the stars in the sky' would come. Abraham believed this and in due course his son Isaac was born. All Jews count their descent as going back to Abraham.

Abraham's faith faltered a bit as he waited for Sarah to become pregnant. He tried to do it his way and had a son Ishmael by his wife's maid Hagar. Arabs all count their descent as going back to Ishmael, and to this day there is a conflict between Jew and Arab. Hebrews does not mention this hiccup in Abraham's faith. Christians, of course, count Abraham as a spiritual father with a spiritual connection through his faith rather than a physical one through his sons.

Despite his faith in God, Abraham did not receive the promised land – that came generations later, when the descendants of his descendants of his grandson Jacob and great grandson Joseph had been led out of slavery in Egypt by Moses to take possession of this promised land. Abraham had faith that this would happen, even though it was not in his lifetime. His role was to have enough faith to obey God and enough faith to await the outcome of God's purposes. Hebrews describes him and his descendants as 'strangers and pilgrims on earth'. This applies to us as well, to have faith.

Even if our faith falters at times, we know that we are not yet where we are meant to be. We may be very comfortable on earth, like Abraham's father Terah was, but we are passing through. We too are strangers and pilgrims on our way to heaven. The great emphasis in our faith in Hebrews and throughout the New Testament is because it is faith in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for us, that brings us to eternal life. We are called to be obedient to God and open to his purposes here on earth as Abraham was but, in the end, our faith is pointing us to an eternal destiny. For faith is the assurance of things hoped for – the absolute certainty of things not seen.

AMEN

Rev Roger Walker

7.8.16