

Sermon by Rev. Susanna Pain on 12 August 2007

Faith is ... (Hebrews 11)

'Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen'
(Heb 11:1)

The writer of Hebrews is so certain and retells the stories of our ancestors in faith.

As encouragement... ancestors who like St Augustine 'whose hearts are restless til they find their rest in God.

Abraham and Sarah... Followed in Faith. Had doubts. Followed.

I turned to James Murray's book 'Would You Believe? Australian Dialogues on Faith and Doubt (Millenium Books 1997) for some thoughts on faith. He begins:

'In 1965 I remember preaching a sermon entitled "The Christian agnostic". It caused me a lot of trouble. Few liked its contention that the honest Christian never claims to "know God", and that many have never experienced any sense of his presence. Indeed, I was suggesting that "faith" was a frail creature, and a gift of God, which seemed to have been denied to a great many good and honest people.

But I found it reassuring that some of my listeners at that time said that I had articulated what they often felt, that there was nobody there, although at other times they had experienced great certainty.

I myself had to admit that I had never, up till that time, experienced the doubts which others admitted. I only knew a strong conviction about God, and in times of silence I thought I sensed his presence.

I had spent my childhood and young manhood under daily assault for embracing religious faith, from a father who was well-versed in the Scriptures, in fact so well-versed that he could make acrobatic leaps of great magnitude, which made it difficult to overcome him in any argument.

He believed that religious faith was the sustenance of weaklings, and that the ultimate and difficult question about life and human destiny were never really confronted by religious believers. His theological advantage was a strict Calvinist upbringing, combined with a deep conviction that the clergy, in particular, were social parasites. His superb education in mathematics made him a very logical and formidable opponent. For him, the prospect of a son in the priesthood was the ultimate disappointment.' (p1-2)

I turned to people of faith to hear their thoughts:

Margaret Rodgers is probably one of the most powerful women in the Anglican Church in Sydney.

'About religious belief she is thoroughly relaxed, and says, 'I can only express it very simply because I believe that faith is a very simple thing. As it works in one's life, it is a very simple thing. Except that you are constantly faced with paradox. You have to be prepared to understand that there are questions which frankly will not allow an answer. But they are part of faith.

"But for me, the essence of my faith is that there is God who permeates our life, the creation and everything that we have. I can't imagine life without thinking about God. And there is Christ, His Son, who died ... So my faith is a very simple, evangelical faith actually."

If there has often been a gulf between evangelical and other Christians on the question of a conversation experience, Margaret Rodgers speaks of no particular time and place when it happened, but of a Lord who lived and died for His people. About that she has an overriding conviction.

"In my daily life," she says, "it is as though there is someone walking with me, being with me so that I find that in moments of fear, in times of crisis, it's almost like reaching out to somebody who's there.

"And it's very interesting for an evangelical Christian like me, that one of the most moving things for me is a chapter in The Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis. 'Lord, in what can I put my trust in this life? Or what, of all things under Heaven, is my greatest comfort? Is it not Thou, O Lord my God, Whose mercies cannot be numbered? Hath it ever been well with me without Thee? When have I suffered ill when Thou wert with me?'"

If Thomas à Kempis seems an unlikely mentor – Margaret Rodgers discovered him through her studies in medieval history – she finds that the 14th century Rhenish monk expresses her own faith perfectly. The Jesus of her experience is like "having a friend, a companion". That the companion is no fiction to Margaret Rodgers is obvious to anyone who meets her.' (p 26 – 27)

Archbishop Stylianos says:

"But I cannot sympathise with non-believers. I cannot say that they have an understanding as I cannot comprehend how they take for granted their own experience when they know they are perishable – and yet deny the reason, the root of life.

"As St Gabriel the Theologian said, 'Oh, you who are beyond everything. What else can I sing to you who are beyond everything.' Nameless. So how can they take for granted their own existence and deny the existence of the One who is beyond everything?"

"I don't want to offend them. I know that faith is not an achievement, a personal achievement. Faith is more a gift from God. Of course we need some humility. If we are humble enough, God gives us his gift."

The Archbishop speaks quietly of his own faith. "I would not be able to survive one day as a faithless person," he says. "I know that I am a sinner and yet I know that God is a loving father. As long as I know he's there, nothing will disturb me. This is why I say, faith, it means more to me personally than oxygen. Because everything has another taste. I read somewhere, years ago, 'I would not be able to eat simple spaghetti if I did not know that God exists. Spaghetti would not have the taste'.

"I must say I only have pity, and I regret this mutilation of some of our fellow people who don't believe, who cannot believe. I don't blame them, because my own faith is not an achievement of my personal studies or my personal virtue. It is, as I said before, a gift. And in this gift I feel honoured. I feel flattered, but I feel privileged and I feel that I owe it to my brothers and sisters to try to tell them that God is more than an intellectual concept. God is more than an emotion. The whole personality, the whole ego, the whole existence must be touched, in order to say, 'Yes, you are there.'"

Archbishop Stylianos concentrates and carries you along with his thought. Wrapped in a tradition which has survived many onslaughts, he says arresting things with a great naturalness. AS he talks of our apprehension of God, he urges the use of the senses. "We have to keep all our senses," he says. "All five senses have to be vigilant in order to perceive God. Otherwise God loves to be hidden. And at the same time he is present everywhere."

He goes on:

"So I must admit that this is not one question in my life. It is the question. It is identical with my life. I would not be able to survive for one moment if I was not believing in God. Life is unbearable without God. Pain and joy. Pleasure. Both negative and positive phenomena are unbearable without God. Unbearable."

(p 44 – 45)

Faith in things unseen is active, not a passive waiting. In Isaiah 1, the people are called upon to participate in the coming of God's reign. They are called to 'learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow' (v17). These are the keys to being able to eat the good of the land. The faith being described in Isaiah is not just a personal experience. It is a community response as well. We work to enact God's reign. (Seasons of the Spirit Resource)

James Murray concludes in his Book of interviews thus:

'Each of the men and women in 'Would You Believe?' is committed to goodness. There is a moral substratum here, and a fidelity to conscience which is at the heart of real righteousness. If the admiration of a secular

society is often reserved for those it judges genuine, even if their beliefs are thought misguided, there is not one person in these pages who has not done something to improve the world around them.

Quite a number have suffered in ways the rest of us would find difficult even to understand. Some have been castigated for their faith, others punished by the subtle discrimination the self righteous think justified. Lies have been told about some, and their actual beliefs and practices have been grossly misrepresented. Yet all have continued on the passionate pilgrimage which leads to the country of peace. As Saint Augustine of Hippo has it, "It is one thing to see the country of peace through a clearing in the forest, but quite another to keep to the way which leads to it". So our glimpses may be momentary, fleeting, transitory, but so are our lives. Challenged by what others have discovered, we seek some sort of faith. Revelation has been opened to us in great teachers. However, we have this extraordinary and precious gift of freedom of the spirit, and can still decide for ourselves what we are to believe.' (p 227 – 228)

In the weekly bulletin there is a further reflection from Macrina Wiederkehr:

*'Life unfolds
a petal at a time
slowly.*

*The beauty of the process is crippled
when I try to hurry growth.
Life has its inner rhythm
which must be respected.
It cannot be rushed or hurried.*

*Like daylight stepping out of darkness,
like morning creeping out of night
life unfolds slowly
a petal at a time
like a flower opening to the sun,
slowly.*

*God's call unfolds
a Word at a time
slowly.*

*A discipline is not made in a hurry.
Slowly I become like the One
to whom I am listening.*

*Life unfolds
a petal at a time
like you and I
becoming the followers of Jesus,
disciplined into a new way of living*

deeply and slowly.

Be patient with life's unfolding petals.

If you hurry the bud it withers.

If you hurry life it limps.

Each unfolding is a teaching

a movement of grace

filled with silent pauses

breath-taking beauty

tears and heartaches.

Life unfolds

a petal at a time

deeply and slowly. (Macrina Wiederkehr, The Song of the Seed, p 120)

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What is your experience?
