God is the faith, the hope and love

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Epiphany + 4C: Lk 4 21f & 1 C 13

With the bushfires threatening Tasmania and Victoria this week, my mind is drawn back up the hill where everyone makes one particular preparation for the bushfire season. They have a little tin box or a small bag near the door containing family photographs, documents, and essential medicines that they want to grab if they ever have to flee a bushfire. Different things are important to each one of us, but it's striking how small a container can be big enough for the absolute essentials. So many things we think are essential for life aren't really.

Those people Jesus offends in the synagogue today; they believed that from a spiritual perspective, they had *their* essentials in the bag. They were ready for *their* sudden exit if it came. They were children of Abraham and Sarah, children of the Promise; God's favoured ones. But Jesus tells them about the time God's favour was given only to a starving Lebanese widow; and another time when God's favour was shown only to a Syrian general with a skin disease, and *not* to the children of the promise; just to people God wanted to bless, *regardless* of their religion.

Jesus tries to tell those people in the synagogue that being a child of the Promise is *not* the essential thing; the essential thing is God's compassion; God's love for the *outsider,* the *poor,* and for *those who suffer*. If poverty and suffering do come our way, they're just the occupational hazards of being mortal. But they're in *no* way signs that God's love had dried up. Look what happened to Jesus himself! God's love was most

deeply present in the way he shared our mortality – our occupational hazard!

What if somebody asked you to name the absolute essentials of our being Christian – what it is that sets us apart from people who aren't Christians?

I suspect one of the first things we'd name is something called *faith*. And we might also mention hope; that we believe we can bear suffering better than we otherwise might because we have *hope*. So we might say that faith and hope are two of the absolute essentials of our Christian life – two things we have in that box by the door. But today, did we hear Paul say that they *aren't*?

Chapter 13 of Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church is perhaps the best known of all his writings. We hear it time and time again at weddings and funerals. But as is so often the case with very familiar words, we may not hear what they actually say. Is *faith* an essential? Paul says, "If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but I do not have love, I am nothing." *Nothing*!? So is he saying we *don't* need faith in that little box of essentials we grab as we rush out the door? That Lebanese widow and the Syrian general were neither of them of the "true faith", remember?

The faith and hope we've got in that box by the door *are* really important; don't get me wrong. But they don't happen in a vacuum; they belong to the 'still more excellent way' that Paul introduces chapter 13 with.

People say to me *"I don't have enough faith"*. I say it too. *"I don't see any chance of hope"*, we say. Paul tells us that we don't have to; it's not our job. We don't have to be the engine-room that generates these things because God is. Listen again to verse 7: [Love] "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. So it's love that does it – it's God who does it!

Love bears all things. What we have to carry through life – we *don't* have to carry alone, because of God's love for us, God is carrying it all with us. If we're hurt, God's love hurts with us. And faith and hope? What does it mean that it's not just us but *love* that does the believing and hoping?

Think about the people who love you. They believe in you, they hope in you because they love you. Their faith in you, the hopes they hold for you are because they love you. It's not something *you've* done; it's not something *they* do. It's a gift; God's free gift of love. And today's gospel tells us there are no prerequisites for receiving God's love – the people of the synagogue in Nazareth would have seen that Lebanese widow and the Syrian general as outsiders, but Jesus reminded the Synagogue of their stories to tell them that no-one is an outsider to God's love.

*Love **believes** all things, **hopes** all things.* There they are – faith and hope – bound together with love. *Faith, hope and love endure* – the absolute essentials; the things we have by the door to grab as we leave. Are we being told today that love is the container for the faith and hope? Or are we the box, and God, in love, puts faith and hope in us? All these are lovely possibilities, yet sometimes we lose faith and hope.

But if I understand Jesus and Paul correctly, it really won't matter if we look inside and find the box empty sometimes. If we lose faith – lose hope, it's not the end. Jesus lost both of them too. And even if we feel like we have no faith and hope at all, that can be okay too. God's love for us looks after that. Remember that Lebanese widow? She had food containers *she* couldn't fill during the drought, but God made sure she always had enough oil and meal in them. [1 Kings 17]

It's out of our hands. God's is the faith; God's is the hope, God's is the love. And for some wonderful reason known only to God, God's love for us means that God places faith in us; God

places hope in us. Our part is to recognise this love and to know that it’s ready by our doorways – by all our doorways – to grab, not for ourselves alone, but to share with everyone we meet – because it’s theirs too. It’s not emergency survival stuff for us; it’s love; it’s meant to bind us together. It will never run out; it will never be withheld. We’ll be okay. Thanks be to God! Amen.