

Faith is far richer than belief or certainty

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Pentecost + 9C – Isa 1 1 10-20 Ps 50 1-8 23-4 Heb 11 1-3 8-16
Luke 12 32-40

I can't tell you how many times I've been with someone who's critically ill and they've said something like, I don't know how anyone without faith gets through this! How does faith do what it does? What is it? Faith is more than believing something is a fact; it's more than believing in an idea or a set of precepts. Faith is much more. We understand faith better when we remember some values that we build from the word faith: faithfulness; in good faith; faithful; yours faithfully; a faithful account; and some of their opposites – faithlessness; in bad faith.

These words say that faith isn't primarily about beliefs; faith is about trust and kindness in relationships. That's what we learn from today's scriptures. Isaiah the prophet declares God's wounded love for the people of Judah and Jerusalem; people who go through all the motions of faithful worship and sacrifice, but fail to deal justly or decently with the most vulnerable members of their community.

As one commentator puts it, The failure to accompany sacrificial and festal worship with a lifestyle of justice and righteousness is the problem. The latter invalidates the former. ... When one's hands are bloody, one needs to wash, clean up, and change one's way of life. It's not lack of worship, but lack of justice, that has produced the bloody hands and God's outrage. John Watts Isaiah 1-33 pp. 21-2
Isaiah calls people to return to lives that are integrated with the faith they claim to represent. That's who a faithful person is – a person of integrity in relationships.

So in the Psalm, where God says, Gather to me my faithful ones, it means gather to me people who have integrity; whose trust in God is a tangible blessing to others. That's what Jesus encourages. Trust God; God's provided us with everything we need. God reaches out to us first. Holding God's outstretched hand in trust, let's hold our other hand out in generosity to a world who needs to learn of God's love.

But that's hard, isn't it. In the ups and downs of life, it's hard to stay faithful to the ideals this relationship commits us to. It can hurt to be generous. It's uncomfortable to be patient. It takes real will-power to be consistently fair and even-tempered; to give people the benefit of the doubt – to give people another chance when they've let us down. Yet that's what being trustworthy, faithful, integrated people means in today's gospel; choosing faithfulness to the call of Jesus to be daily more like him.

Yes, it's hard. And that's where our reading from Hebrews comes in. The letter to the Hebrews was written to a minority community who were suffering from a lot of mistrust and bad press in the place they lived. Jewish Christians in Rome, they'd have got it in the neck both from the Romans and from the local Jewish community. Some had already been in prison, had their possessions plundered; most had experienced hostility, ridicule, and shame, simply because following Jesus, a crucified savior, set them at odds with both their surrounding cultures – Roman and Jewish (10.32-39). How do you encourage people to remain steadfastly faithful; keep their integrity; to persevere in the face of abuse, prejudice and mistrust? In this Land, Aboriginal, Muslim and Jewish communities wrestle with this constantly.

The writer of Hebrews presents us with a litany of heroes of the faith – in today's passage, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob. They kept faith with God even in the face of disappointment and hardship. These names are also reminders that God has always called people into places which are

challenging. But we later generations all look back with thanks and respect at the trust we see at work between these pioneers and God. We see that for these people, the challenges they've chosen to face have shaped them into the extraordinary people God knew they could become.

Most particularly, through these stories of challenge and growth, we get to see God's faithfulness at work in transforming lives to bring about the great events of salvation history. Because in all of these stories, if you ask who was the one really risking everything in faith, the answer is God. And the wonder of it all is that God asks Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, and each of us to join as partners in this great risk-taking; it's an astounding honour. We are asked to discover the gift of God's faithfulness, and we're challenged to risk our now so we might discover that faithfulness – that integrity – in ourselves; discover who God knows we can be.

So faith is far richer than belief or certainty – it's not something we do; something we scrunch up our faces and wish for. It's an invitation; a free gift; a relationship of trust. It's the blessing of a call to discover who we might become.

Jesus says: Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Could faith be the place where you find a true home for your heart? Does God offer our hearts a real home? And are we meant to open that home to others? Clearly, yes. Amen