

I want on this sermon to address the question of what is faith? It seems like a good question to tackle, given that our epistle from the Book of Hebrews offers the Bible's clearest definition of what the word faith means. It says, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." But before going any further into any detail, let me just tell you a story. It's a story about a young missionary who was working in a largely Muslim country. And he was out one day driving, and he ran out of gas, but it wasn't too serious because he could see the gas station just down the road. So he thought, "Well, I'll just go and go there, get some petrol in a receptacle, bring it back." But he looked in the car.

The only thing he could find in his car that he could carry petrol in was a what in England we'd call a potty, it was one of his children's...he had young children, they were toilet training this child, and they had a plastic thing, maybe a potty chair or whatever it's called over here. You'll get the idea. Anyway, he got that out the back of the car, went to the petrol station, got a bit of gas, came back and was filling up the gas tank, when somebody drove past, wound down the window and shouted out to him, "I don't share your religion, but I sure admire your faith." That's, of course, a silly story, but it does contain one simple but significant truth. Namely, that faith is a doing word, it's an action word. It's not static. Having faith is not merely an intellectual thing, it's not simply asserting to a set of theological propositions or doctrines. Faith, in a Christian sense, is more elusive. Having faith is about putting our trust in the God who is made known in the person of Jesus Christ.

Growing in faith isn't about believing more and more doctrines, it's about that trust deepening, and that relationship with God developing and becoming richer and more intimate. We see that playing out in the example of faith that the writer in our reading offers. He talks about Abraham, who's held up as a model of faith in three great world religions. And Abraham reveals his faith when he moved to a new country to receive his inheritance. God called, Abraham got up and went.

By faith, he set out for a new place, a new country. Abraham demonstrated that faith is a doing word. He didn't just believe in his head that God had a plan for him, he lived it out in his life. He acted on that call and went up with his entourage to the new home that God had prepared for him. So let me ask you to consider a question. What do you think might be the opposite of faith? What words come into your head when you hear that question?

Maybe the word doubt, that I would imagine came into lots of people's minds. But I don't think faith and doubt are opposites because in my experience, doubt is actually part of faith. In fact, if there wasn't an element of doubt in our faith, then it wouldn't really be faith, it'd be something else. It would be a certainty or proof. So, I think faith, it's not doubt that's the opposite, I think the opposite of faith is fear. Take this story. Imagine a child's engulfed in a high-rise tower that's in flames. And this child escaped to the ledge and the building's going up in flames and there's smoke billowing out of the building. And this child is stuck on a ledge on the seventh floor. And the firefighters come, and they see the child, and they gather at the bottom, perhaps they're holding a big mat or something. And they call up to the child, "Jump, jump, and you'll be safe, we'll catch you."

Well, the child has two options. One is that they can stay on the ledge because they're afraid to jump, or they can have faith that the firefighters will catch them, and they could jump. Those are the choices, faith or fear. Fear holds us back, faith enables us to jump, to move forward, which is why we talk about a leap of faith. I think that the faith I have in Jesus Christ is reasonable, logical and coherent. I can tell you why I believe that Jesus is the Son of God, but I'm very aware I can't prove it to you or to anybody. The best I can do is lay out the evidence as I see it and invite you to make a leap of faith. I once heard a man talking about that leap of faith and how he came to make it.

And he said he was a fisherman. And that when he was fishing on the riverbank, he'd get excited when he saw and felt the line moving, he felt something tugging on the fishing line. He couldn't see a fish,

but he knew there was one there because he could feel it. And he compared that experience to coming to faith. He said, "Sometimes I just feel God tugging on my heart. I can't see him. But I feel his presence, I feel that tug." And coming to faith is responding to that tug. Faith isn't something we achieve on our own, it's not a prize, it's not something we work out by ourselves. It's a gift, it's something we receive, it's something we respond to. Coming to faith is a bit like getting a joke. Two people can hear the same joke. One can laugh uproariously, the other just stays there stony-faced. And we all know that you can't explain a joke. You either get it or you don't.

And going back to the opposite of faith, I think it's interesting to note that we talk about being gripped by fear because lots of people would talk as well about being gripped by faith. That there's something in us which perhaps we can't rationalize, but nevertheless compels us to believe certain things, to act in certain ways. Faith, as it's described in our reading, it's not a destination, it's not a conclusion, it's not a form of closure. Faith is a longing, faith is a hunger, faith is a desire. According to Abraham's story, faith is that restless energy that pushes us out of the door and on the road in pursuit of the inheritance that God has promised to his people, the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Faith is the audacity to undertake a perilous journey, simply because God asks us to, not because we know ahead of time where we're going. Faith is the willingness to stretch our imaginations, and see new birth, new life, new joy, even when we feel dead and withered inside.

At the end of the Second World War, the Allied forces were searching through farms in France, looking for snipers, and they came to a ruined house. And they found these words written on a crumbling wall in the basement; "I believe in the sun even when it does not shine, I believe in love even when it is not shown, I believe in God, even when he does not speak." Those words were written on that wall by a person of deep faith. So how do we get this faith? Well, we can ask for it,

we can look for it. Some people know that I very nearly didn't make it back from England a few weeks ago after our vacation because two days before we were due to leave, I realized I didn't know where my green card was, and I couldn't get back into the States without my green card. So, there was 24 hours of frantic looking. I started off looking in the obvious places, but it wasn't there. It was well and truly lost.

So, I started looking in less obvious places. And after 24 hours of frantic activity, I found my green card in a shoe. I've no idea how it got there. We need to pursue God with the kind of intensity with which I looked for my green card. And we need to be prepared to be surprised. Like my green card, God might be residing in an unlikely place. And when we find faith, we need to receive it. I know many people who start coming to church and find they can't come to church without crying. And then some people decide that they don't want to come anymore because it makes them feel uncomfortable. But those tears, in my experience, are more often than not a sign of God's presence. It's God's Holy Spirit tugging in our hearts that makes those tears. And once we find faith, we must do all we can to develop it. Faith is like a muscle. The more we use it, the stronger it gets. For me, the single biggest thing I can do to strengthen my faith is to pray and read the Bible every day.

I read a Psalm every day, which builds my faith and feeds my soul. I pray that we'll all develop ways to find faith and then to encourage its growth, so that we'll all deepen our assurance of things hoped for and strengthen our convictions for things not seen. Amen.