

### Proper 14C – SJ – Our Faith Is Faith

*Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16 St. John's Salisbury, CT*

The Rev. Canon Lance Beizer 8/8/10

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

That sentence is from the sermon by an unknown preacher in the earliest days of Christianity that has come to be the only sermon in our New Testament. It is certainly, for me at least, one of the most poignant of all sentences in our Bible, for there have been many times in my life, as I'm sure there have also been in yours, that my faith has had to be based not on the things that almost anyone would agree deserve it, but on what might appear to have been the slimmest of assurances. It recalls for me also the words of perhaps the most quoted passage in the New Testament, the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Paul's first letter to the weird and wonderful Christian community in Corinth. You will, I'm sure, remember how it ends. “And now,” Paul writes, “faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

I think it's easy to see why Paul classifies love as the greatest of these three attributes, since it speaks of an out-flowing towards God and towards our neighbor. But faith and hope are by no means unimportant, and, for the author of Hebrews, they are clearly related – “Faith is the assurance,” he says, after all, “of things *hoped for*....” Why, though, are faith and hope as important as Paul suggests? Well, let's face it; life can sometimes be tough. And, frankly, no matter how good we may be, no matter what bargains we strike with our God, we are simply not going to get out of every jam we get into. Don't forget, one category of the saints declared by the Roman Catholic Church is that of martyrs – those killed because of their faith. Saints they may have been, but they didn't get out of their ultimate jam. When we use that word, faith, in context of the martyrs, it behooves us to recognize that there really is more than one sense in which we traditionally use the word. The Greek word for faith is “*pistis*,” which can mean faith in the way we mean it here, a kind of showering of trust onto something or someone. But it can also be used to refer to a belief in something, or even to what it is that one believes. Hence we may speak, for example, of the Christian faith, where the word “faith” is a kind of substitute for the word “religion,” or even for the body of doctrines associated with our “faith.”

Anyway, my point about the martyrs is that, no matter how strong their faith may have been, they weren't rewarded materially for it; instead, they died for it. So we must be clear that faith is not some magic route to prosperity, health and happiness. Nor is it a guarantee that nothing will ever go wrong in our lives. Rather it is that which may help us cope with all the pain and difficulties that we shall *surely* encounter in our paths through life. It is by faith that we can retain our humanity and reflect God's love to others *always*, no matter what may befall us personally. That's in essence why faith, hope and love are the three attributes that Paul puts together in that wonderful chapter 13 in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians.

Are we meant, because of our faith, to be able to go through life without any doubts? Are we thereby insulated from the disruptive quality of doubt? Brennan Manning, former Franciscan priest, and now prolific Christian spiritual writer, asks the question this way: "But what about doubts and worries? Do they, too, signal a rejection of God's Kingdom?" And he answers his question:

Not necessarily. There can be no faith without doubt, no hope without anxiety, and no trust without worry. These shadow us from dawn to dusk; indeed, they appear even in our dreams.

One of the best-known of all modern religious figures has got to be Mother Teresa, the Albanian nun who spent so many years tending to the dying in Calcutta, who won for her work the Nobel Peace Prize, and who is currently under consideration by her church for beatification as a saint. Yet she spent years of a spiritual dryness. She has written about that dryness – about her doubts:

Where is my faith? Even deep down ... there is nothing but emptiness and darkness ... If there be God—please forgive me. When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven, there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul ... How painful is this unknown pain—I have no Faith. Repulsed, empty, no faith, no love, no zeal, ... What do I labor for? If there be no God, there can be no soul. If there be no soul then, Jesus, You also are not true.

Her response, though, despite her expressed doubts and lack of faith, as she understood the word, in God – Her response to those massive doubts was not to run from her religion, but to immerse herself in her work of helping to relieve pain and misery with the faith that doing so was the right thing to do. In those circumstances there can be no more that one can do for oneself than to continue to do the right thing for others – to trust that doing so is good, no matter whatever other doubts may cause anxiety.

Let me remind you of what Alan Jones, former dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, has said about faith. "The opposite of faith," he has said in one of his really helpful books, "is not doubt, but certainty." In other words, if you are absolutely certain that, for example, the earth rotates around the sun – then you needn't have to rely on your faith that the sun will rise tomorrow, even if you won't, because of cloud cover, actually be able to see it rise. Indeed, it's hard for me to imagine a context in which faith is important to me without at least some doubt lingering in the background to nag at me – even, perhaps, to keep me from a really good night's sleep.

Here, indeed, may be where hope and faith can be distinguished from each other. Suppose we are about to have an operation for a life-threatening condition. We are surely entitled to hope that all will go well and that that condition will no longer

threaten us. But there are bound to be doubts, are there not? Faith is better placed in the ultimate grace of God to sustain and protect us, no matter the result of the operation. As our Book of Common Prayer so eloquently puts it:

For none of us has life in himself,  
and none becomes his own master when he dies.  
For if we have life, we are alive in the Lord,  
and if we die, we die in the Lord.  
So, then, whether we live or die,  
we are the Lord's possession.

Of course, even with the assurances that our religion gives us, are we not still likely to have *some* doubts about whether we shall end in God's loving embrace? What if Heaven really *is* reserved for some really small number of folks who believe things we have always found beyond our ability to believe? What if God really *is* judgmental and vindictive? I don't believe that to be the case, and I hope you don't either, but, not having yet died, how can I be certain? What is left to me, therefore, is faith. Indeed, when Jesus despaired on the cross, what was left to him was faith – the same faith that sustained him through his public ministry and through the corrupt trial that resulted in his death by such a cruel means.

Even if we consider those things that people may accomplish in their lives, much has to be done through faith. In today's passage from Hebrews the author tells us of Abraham, who traveled many miles into a new life, and of both him and Sarah, who each became parents at a ridiculously advanced age. How, but through faith, could they have managed to undertake such feats? I read recently of those who built the glorious cathedrals we travel to Europe to visit. None of those craftsmen, except the very last, ever saw the result of their craftsmanship, because it took so many years to complete each of the buildings. Moses never saw the Promised Land from within it. And as for our modern-day Moses, Martin Luther King – here's what he said: "I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land." So he didn't get to enter it either.

Faith, then, is an attribute that underlies – and underscores – so much of what our lives are all about. Without it we could hardly survive our time here. Fear not the niggling doubts that might accompany your faith. They're unavoidable. But hold tight to your faith. With it both life and death will be nothing to fear, for "...whether we live or die, we are the Lord's possession."

AMEN