

Community of Living Faith

Readings: Genesis 15:1-6; Romans 5:1-5; Luke 7:1-10

When you explain to people that you go to Church, perhaps even worse work for the Church they are likely to give you a look that says "What on earth are you doing?" There may be times, particularly on a very cold morning when you may think "What on earth are we doing?"

As the Dean of this Cathedral, I am proposing that we give ourselves an answer to that question. I would like us to operate under a mission statement of "Proclaiming Jesus as Lord in the heart of Hobart, to build a community of living faith, profound hope and practical love." As I preach, as we gather, as we serve God together we want to welcome people into our community of faith, hope and love.

I thought it was worthwhile to think through this little statement, to consider what it means to be a community of living faith, profound hope and practical love. In four sermons over the next couple of months we will explore these ideas. I hope and I pray that everyone involved with the Cathedral will think them through, so that we will all have a good sense of what on earth we are doing.

I WISH I HAD YOUR FAITH

In my years of ministry I have had many things that I think are quite odd said to me. Perhaps the most common one would be "I wish I had your faith." I guess there are stranger things people could have said, like "I wish I had your eyebrow", or "I wish I had your dress sense" to which I would have said "You're welcome to them!"

But in one sense that is why I think it is odd when people say "I wish I had your faith" because my response is the same "You're welcome to it." We are to be giving away the faith in that sense. The purpose of all true Christian ministry is to bring people to faith, a living faith.

This week we will consider the foundational matter of a community of living faith.

FAITH

At the heart of the Christian faith is well, faith. What does this word mean, faith? It is a confidence, a trust, a dependence on God and his promises, to believe and rely on this God. Throughout the Scriptures what God wants from his people is faith. So in Genesis 15, Abram, soon to be called Abraham, is told that despite the fact that he and his wife are old they will have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. Despite current circumstances Abraham believes God, and we are told that it is credited to him as righteousness. That means he is put in the right with God and is considered one of God's people simply because he has believed that what God says is true.

It is just the same in the New Testament. We see it in the faith shown by the Roman centurion in Luke 7. Here is a man who recognises who Jesus is and knows that his word of authority is enough to heal his servant. Jesus is astounded at this man's faith, greater than any he has found among God's people.

This story also shows us that in the New Testament faith is not focused simply on God but on Jesus, God's Son, who acts with all God's authority. All the promises of God are wrapped up and fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. He is the one who is the way, the truth, and the life and the resurrection is God's seal of approval on him and this statement. This is then what we are called to believe, to trust in. We are called simply to trust in Jesus as the way, the truth and life.

When we were packing for the move from NSW to Tasmania at the start of the year we had to decide which CDs were going (all of them obviously), which of George's jumpers were going (all of them obviously, after all were moving to Tasmania). But I really wrestled with the many theological books in my office, and there are so many books. I kept them but as I look at them I am reminded that whilst there is much to consider that flows from understanding who Jesus is, profound issues that need to be thought through, I don't really need any of those books. I just need to have faith, to believe, to trust in Jesus.

You see this of course challenges what many people think of as Christian faith, that it is all wrapped up in ritual, or glorying in guilt, perpetuated by penance, doing duties, thinking theologically. This is not the Christian faith at all it, Christian faith is simply to believe in Jesus Christ

And if I do this the Bible says that I have salvation. Paul writes in Romans 10:9 "if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

This is why we proclaim Jesus so that people will come to this faith and be saved. This is the offer that is made whenever Jesus is proclaimed as Lord. Is it an offer you have accepted?

LIVING FAITH – A LIVING KING

As we think this through we find this means that the Christian faith is not about having a guiding principle, a set of precepts, a moral code, or a collection of doctrines. Rather it is a belief, a trust, a dependence, a reliance on a living God, and a very specific God: the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faith is about relationship with this living God.

And this is what the Bible says we have when we trust God. "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand." Romans 5:1-2

By faith our relationship with God is restored. By faith we know the grace of God and "the love that he has lavished on us that we should be called the Children of God." (1John 3:1) Our faith is to be a living faith because it is in a living God and a God who has done all that is necessary for us to be in relationship with him.

Now what I have already said also challenges what many people think of faith. Many people will tell me they have a faith because they believe in God, but we are not called to believe in God. Martin Lloyd Jones, a great preacher of the last century was asked how he would define faith, and he responded "Believing God, not believing in God, but believing God."¹ We are called to personal trust in and commitment to a personal God, not to just acknowledge the possible existence of a god.

There is a very scary verse in James 2 which says "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder." We are not called to believe, to assent to things about God but to trust him, and be in relationship with the living God and he by his grace has done all that we need to be in such a relationship with him.

Perhaps an illustration will help. Imagine a scene in a restaurant. There is a young man who has been saving up all that he has, even selling some of his possessions so that he can buy a ring to show the object of his affection the depth of his

¹ Quoted in R.T. Kendall, In Pursuit of His Glory, p29.

commitment and love. At a certain moment he gets the box out of his pocket, opens it up and slides it across the table and says with conviction "I love you". Now how do you think he would respond if the woman rather distractedly answered "I believe that men exist." What kind of an answer is that? Would it be any better if she said "I believe that you love." No he wants an answer that reciprocates his love and deepens the relationship.

Yet in reality this is what so many people do with God. He has given the most precious thing that he has by which he says "I love you" to the whole world, would he really be happy with an answer of "I believe in God." No. He wants an answer that leads to relationship.

We are called to move beyond the concept of God to believing the word of our creator God. That in him is forgiveness, restored relationship with him, and eternal life with him. If our faith only ever remains believing a certain number of things about God, however true they remain, ours will never be a living faith in a living God. To know there is forgiveness is different from trusting God that we are forgiven. To know that God is a Father is different from believing that he is our Father. To know that Jesus was risen from the dead is different from trusting Jesus with our future.

The greatest barrier here is that we want to trust in ourselves more than trust in God. But when we think about it to trust in ourselves is an extraordinary act of faith. An act of faith that usually flies in face of reality. How reliable are we really? Do you keep your promises? We are simply not trustworthy. But to have faith in God in one sense not an act of faith, for it is simply to recognise the way that he is reliable, that he has and does keep his promises. We need to stop having faith in ourselves and have faith in God.

We may also perhaps have difficulty in trusting anyone because we have been hurt in the past. It is so much less risky to believe in a concept than to really commit yourself to someone else, but again God has shown himself faithful, he will not let us down, never will he leave us or forsake us.

Ours is a living God who calls us to trust him and his promises which are for us, promises of salvation, promises of forgiveness, promises of relationship, promises of eternity, and what he had done in Jesus shows that he is trustworthy. Proclaiming Jesus as risen and living Lord should lead to a living faith.

LIVING FAITH – ALIVE

This idea of a living faith is further strengthened when we realise as Paul goes on to tell us that as we trust in God, we rely on him, as we stop trusting ourselves and trust our creator he gives us his Spirit to be with us and to remind us of the grace that we have. Our faith is not just to be a living faith because we believe in a living God, but because he is alive in us by his Spirit. And listen again to those wonderful words "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us"

This means that when we speak of a living faith it cannot be something that is dealt with once a week or on an ad hoc basis. Rather it is an ongoing living relationship with God, something that is an integral part of our lives. It will mean trusting him in all areas of our lives. It will mean ongoing prayer to our heavenly Father. It will mean reading our Bible to be reminded and taught so that we will live as God's children.

But it will also mean sharing in the life of the community. It is our faith that creates the Christian church. What binds us together is not that we all live in the Hobart and surrounds, or that we like a particular style of Christian congregational worship although this may be true as well. What ultimately ties us together is that we are all children of God, we share the faith. As we say "Peace be with you" in our service, it is not a prayer, but a statement, God's peace is with us, and so we have peace with each other. Part then of a living faith will be wanting to join together with our fellow believers and celebrate our saviour and support each other. Proclaiming Jesus as Lord creates and builds the community of living faith

We have considered what a living faith is. We believe in a risen alive Saviour, but does our faith need to be risen too, to become truly alive.

LIVING FAITH – LIVED OUT IN HOPE AND LOVE

As we grasp what a living faith is we will see that it naturally leads to a profound hope and to practical love. You will have to come to the sermons over the next few months to think these through fully but we can briefly sketch out the idea.

If we grasp all that we have by faith our lives will be dominated by hope because God is ultimately on our side. This means his promises of salvation, forgiveness, relationship and eternal life are true despite what may happen in life, by faith we believe that to be true. In Hebrews 11 there is a great definition of faith “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” The writer then goes on to point to the faith of some of the great believers of the Old Testament. He ultimately looks to Jesus who is the great indeed the perfect faithful one and showed great hope in going through death.

Whilst we do need to look to Jesus who is “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2) the faith that others show can also be a great encouragement to us as their faith leads to hope. It is one of the great privileges of my job to sit with Christians who are suffering and for them to speak of the knowledge that God is with them and they know where they are going. I pray that I will have a living faith like theirs. Living faith leads to a profound hope.

But it also leads to practical love. Because the more we grasp the love that God has for us, the love that he has poured into our hearts, the more we will long to live it out and reflect it out to others. In other words we will not only have a living faith in a living God, it will be lived out in our lives.

It is perhaps worth pointing out that this faith, hope and love could be summed up as thankfulness, for it will grasp all that God has done, is doing and will do, for us, in us and through us. A living faith is a thankful faith.

PROCLAIMING JESUS AND BUILDING THE COMMUNITY

As we proclaim Jesus as Lord then our faith will be strengthened. We will understand deeper the promises of salvation, forgiveness, relationship and eternal life. We will then build each other up as we display hope and love in all the chances and changes of this fleeting world and so build up the community. But such living faith will not only be for the benefit of the church community it will benefit the wider community. As we live out a faith of hope and love then people are bound to say “I wish I had a faith like yours” and you with joy you can invite them in and say “You’re welcome to it.”