Sermon for Second in Lent Year B

Readings: Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

i

I have never had the faith to jump from an aircraft with a parachute strapped to my back. It doesn’t matter how many others have successfully done so; it just doesn’t seem a sane thing to do and I daren’t do it.

Faith in God is like jumping out of a plane **without** a parachute because at least you can see a parachute and you have the control of packing it yourself.

We talk such a lot about faith. We make it sound easy because we have tamed the fear and dread of it by our familiarity with the word. But when the crunch comes- faith is still one enormous challenge, one giant leap into the unknown.

Yet it is not really the unknown – not since we have had the revelation of Jesus Christ and the Resurrection – in truth it is no more unknown than knowing that parachutes work. Yet, knowing the theory and putting it into practice are not the same.

But for dear old Abraham, it truly was a leap into the unknown. He had been called to leave the comfort of Ur of the Chaldees and then the city of Haran to follow a new God that no one had ever known before, a God with no name, a God with no image, leading him to a place he did not know, to settle him in a land that others already held.

This same God promised him that he would make him a father of a great nation – yet he and Sarah his wife were already well on in years, past the normal child-bearing years.

No wonder Abraham is the principle example of faith and the father of all the followers of the Abrahamic faiths who manage to believe in the invisible God.

But most of us fall far short of Abraham’s faith. We prefer to pack and wear our own parachute. And this is precisely what keeps on happening.

In the Jewish tradition it was and remains the Law, the Torah that serves as a tangible, visible, understandable mediator between us and that invisible God.

And in Christianity too, despite all that Jesus said and St Paul wrote, it keeps on happening whenever we superimpose inflexible rules and conventions upon our faith in Christ.

We have resorted to inflexible rules in Puritan times by destroying statues and stripping altars and banning festivals; and Methodists have done it in their pietistic excoriations against the demon drink, gambling, dancing and a variety of other fun, if rather risky, activities. Rule keeping means you know exactly where you stand: religion and rule keeping have always been bedfellows, but to the detriment of both.

We prefer to exchange the intangible for the tangible; the invisible for the visible and the mystery for the predictable. So we exchange a relationship based on faith, trust and love for a life of rules, conventions and written words we can quote from a book.

The Protestant theologian Karl Barth once said many Protestants have simply made the Bible into their Paper Pope.

The dangers of exchanging relational religion for tangible rule-keeping religion are several, but one of them is that we see fault where no fault lies, and punish in places where no punishment is merited and overlook the hidden places where condemnation is appropriate.

So Methodists, for example, have over the years condemned the young person going to a dance or a chap going for a day at the races, or anybody wanting to go to a shop on Sunday. Yet we do not see the man in our midst who thinks he is superior to any woman; or the woman who prays in her pew, but won’t be there at all if she knows a certain other person from the Women’s Fellowship is going to be there too that Sunday.

In the history of the church so much of what we have called faith has not been faith at all. It has been substitutes for faith; and that’s not the same as faith itself.

ii

It is a fine line between faith and lunacy. How does the saying go: It is the definition of madness to keep on doing the same things over and over again and expect a different result? Our faith can skirt very close indeed to that territory.

For our faith is not based on what we see; we do not extrapolate the evidence before us and work it out from there like some particularly gifted economists. We believe in a God who calls into being things that do not exist.

Past precedence, or even the evidence before our eyes, which serve for most people as reliable guides for future expectations, represent no boundaries for faith. When someone dies they remain dead – but tell that to the widow of Nain and her son, or Lazarus and his sisters – or the disciples after the first Easter. People who walk on water sink, water does not (sadly) just turn into wine; lame people do not get up and walk and people who are born blind do not suddenly see and people of Abraham and Sarah’s age do not have babies.

Faith is power. To have faith that God can do what he has promised is power. It gives power to keep on when others have given up; power to try something others say will never work; power to help when others are overwhelmed; power to forgive when others are filled with revenge; power to hope when all hope is apparently vain.

The margin between true faith and madness is fine indeed.

iii

Perhaps some comfort can be found in the fact that faith has always been difficult for most of us. In Mark 8:31-38 even Peter finds it hard – and he did manage to walk on water – even if it was at his second attempt.

Peter has become the Rock on which Christ would build his Church: he is the one who proclaims – “You are the Messiah!” in Mark 8:**29**.

By verse **33** Peter is accused of being Satan – a tempter trying to lure Jesus away from the path which God has appointed him.

Peter has grasped that God’s plan is being fulfilled in Jesus who is the Messiah, but he has not yet grasped that God intends Jesus to win that victory through dying on a cross. Peter could understand Jesus when he said, “He will be put to death,” but he failed to understand the part that came from beyond his experience, from beyond what he thought existed, and so he failed to understand the second part of the sentence: “but three days later he will rise to life.”

Since he cannot understand it, it is as if Jesus never said it. How often do we see that today in those who do not believe?

It does indeed defy human logic to say execution will in fact be the moment of victory; forgetting oneself will be the way to find oneself; to give up your life will be the way to save it; to turn away from the treasures of this earthly life is the way to gain the whole world.

No wonder we prefer to hold on to rules and regulations and quote chapter and verse from books rather than live by faith.

If you find faith easy, you’re a better person than I am, and for that matter than Peter and the disciples too. For much of the time they didn’t believe their ears either. And don’t forget that even Sarah, when she was told that she and Abraham were to have a son, was overheard having a little chuckle to herself.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

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