

*The substance of faith.*

Pondering our passage from the letter to the Hebrews this morning reminded me of where I was almost exactly three years ago. I was visiting South Africa and I recall our first day in Johannesburg, when we went to the huge Apartheid museum which tells the whole sorry story of apartheid and how it came about, and of the bitter and courageous struggle waged against it. The museum contains much newsreel footage that portrays the horror of what took place during those turbulent years, and one particular item struck me. Winnie Mandela is being interviewed sometime in the deepest, dark depths of the struggle. Not only has her husband been captured and tried and sent to Robben Island with a life sentence, but almost the entire leadership of the African National Congress has suffered the same fate. With so many of the key leaders of the resistance either locked up or in exile, the newspaper headlines trumpet the success of the government. Apartheid has been consolidated. It has seen off the opposition and the situation looks hopeless for those who are fighting for change. And Winnie Mandela is interviewed by a journalist and asked, ‘what now?’ What about the future? Is apartheid here to stay? And Winnie Mandela, dignified and self-assured, looks at the interviewer with a kind of cool defiance and says that she has absolutely no doubt whatsoever that the struggle will triumph and apartheid will go. And it was that conviction that sustained her and so many others in the dark and difficult times, and that compelled them to action and to risk and to sacrifice. It was that deep defiance that made them challenge the status quo. It was that strong resilience that drove them to subvert the present to make way for the future they knew must come. Now, that is faith for you – faith that gives assurance to convictions that are not yet realised – or faith gives *substance* to convictions that are not yet realised would be a better way of putting it: faith makes our convictions concrete.

Recalling the apartheid struggle, it seems, is an appropriate way into our passage from the Letter to the Hebrews this morning, as it appears from the rest of the book that the writer is addressing a congregation that is under pressure and where believers are flagging and in danger of throwing in the towel. Evidently some had been subjected to persecution and prison, and most had endured ridicule and shame for following Jesus, and they were growing weary. Not surprisingly, it seems that people were staying away from church and some

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were apparently considering returning to the Jewish faith from which they had come, renouncing faith in Jesus.

Well, faced with this crisis it is interesting to see the strategy of the writer of the letter. He does not talk about their situation. He does not hit the Hebrews with tips about how to reverse church decline. He does not lecture them about how to cope with stress. No, he begins in the opening chapters of the book by talking about Jesus. Yes, that's right: he gives them not therapy but theology. He proclaims Christ is in all his fullness. He draws on the Hebrew Scriptures, on the psalms especially, and he stretches language to breaking point as he tries to convey the greatness of this Son who now sits at the right hand of God's majesty on high. And then he goes on to tease out the extraordinary ways in which this Christ gathers up in himself all the practices and traditions of the Jewish faith.

That's the first thing - he talks about Jesus. And having done so he can then move on in this chapter to talk about faith. He knows that this people's faith is faltering. He knows that their faith is a smouldering wick that is close to burning out. But only when he has expounded the wonder of Jesus can he go on to talk about faith, for faith requires a foundation. It requires something to build on. If I tell you to put your faith in me you're going to want to know about me, why you should trust me. And those who struggled against apartheid could put their faith in the future because they could see that the present system was unsustainable. And every sign of the system creaking and every little sign of hope gave substance to their faith that the walls would eventually come tumbling down. It was clear where the future lay. And the writer to the Hebrews could see that the future lay with Jesus because of who he is and what he had accomplished.

Now, what the writer tells us here is that faith involves the interplay between the seen and the unseen. So, in those trying times when apartheid seemed to be triumphing and crushing every flicker of hope, liberation was far from visible. It was obscured by the daily, grim spectre of the oppressive apartheid system. But faith discerned that the present, visible order things would change. And this is where faith is linked very closely to imagination for, you see, it is in our imagination that we are set free to discern things not yet visible. In South Africa faith allowed the imagination to soar high above the status quo and to envision a post-apartheid future as yet invisible. And that is why faith is expressed in songs and in poetry and in stories because these give

free play to the imagination and they liberate us from the constraints and limitations of the visible present so that we can celebrate the invisible future.

Some of you may know the book by Antoine de Saint Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, in which a mysterious fox promises to tell a little boy the greatest of life's secrets. The secret, as finally revealed, is that 'It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.'<sup>1</sup> That brings us to what the writer to the Hebrews says about the creation of the world: 'By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the Word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible'. The scientist looks at the world and discerns laws and processes and all the delicate complexities of the cosmos. Faith, however, looks at exactly the same things but sees in them and beyond them to the invisible hand of God that formed it all. That's the point. What is essential - essential to life, essential to existence, essential to meaning, is invisible to the eye but visible to the heart. And the heart sees by faith. It sees things invisible to the senses.

In my previous church in Cambridge I regularly visited an elderly man – we'll call him Bill – whose beloved wife suffered from advanced Alzheimer's disease. Bill cared for her heroically, keeping vigil at her bedside. Suddenly, one day, inexplicably, she sat bolt upright in bed and she held out her arms with a look of wonder on her face. The she fell back, dead. What did she see? That's the question Bill asked again and again. What did she see? Who knows? But in those final moments the mists in her mind parted and she saw what up until that moment had been visible not to her eyes but only to her heart.

That brings us to the next part of the writer's argument. He has spoken of Christ and he's spoken of faith and then he turns to where faith is to be found. Faith, after all, needs to be embodied. It needs to find expression in lives. Invisible hopes and convictions need to be given substance here and now. So our writer looks back and comes up with a roll call of people who have lived out the faith: Abraham and Sarah, and others. These are people in whose lives faith took flesh. Some commentators call them 'the heroes of the faith', but I'm not sure about that. I like the distinction that has been made between heroes and saints<sup>2</sup>. Heroes, it is argued, are always central characters in a story - whereas saints are often peripheral and out of the limelight. And the hero is possessed of

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted by Thomas G. Long in his *Commentary on Hebrews (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, p.114)*.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Wells, currently vicar of St Martin's in the Fields, London.

great qualities like strength and bravery - while the saint may have nothing to offer but faithfulness. And heroes are often exemplified in the soldier who goes out to battle and is rewarded with honour - while the saint is represented by the martyr who suffers willingly and who is rewarded only by God. Again, the hero triumphs and makes everything turn out right - while the saint may fail and may appear to have served a lost cause. And, finally, the hero stands out alone, independent - while the saint is sustained by a community, dependent on others the communion of saints. Our culture, of course, celebrates heroes because they embody the qualities and virtues of the world, and the apartheid struggle has its heroes. But faith celebrates saints: quirky, oddball, deviant people like those listed in Hebrews 11. So Abraham is celebrated for leaving home for an unknown destination – but let's not forget that this is the same Abraham who twice tried to pass off his wife as his sister to save his own skin, endangering hers in the process. And the passage mentions Sarah who is celebrated for believing that God would give her a child, despite her great age. But recall that this is the same Sarah who laughed in derision and disbelief when told that she would conceive. These are saints – flawed people caught up into the odd rhythms of grace and whose lives make absolutely no sense at all if God does not exist.

And to their community, their communion we belong – you and me. We are Abraham's descendants, promised to him long ago in the stars in the dark night sky. We live by faith, seeing not with the eyes but with the heart. And our task is to give substance to that faith, to give it expression in our lives, to make it visible. In just the same way that grace is made visible here at the table of our Lord, in bread and wine. Amen.

O gracious and holy God,  
God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob –  
and of Sarah and Rebecca and Rachel,  
we praise your holy name.

We praise you for creating all things in their glory and wonder.  
And we praise you that when we this world had fallen  
into sin and disorder you raised up your special people Israel.  
And we praise you that in Jesus you have opened up your  
chosen people to every tribe and tongue and nation.  
And we praise you for all those who have gone before us,  
who have lived out the faith and left us a witness and example.

O God forgive us we pray for our failures  
to live up to our calling.

Forgive us for when we have been faithless,  
for when we have been squeezed into the world's mould,  
when we have conformed rather than being transformed  
and we've lost anything distinctive and different.  
Forgive us for when we have acted out of fear rather than faith.  
O God we confess our sins and failures as your people and seek your mercy.

O God you come to us in Jesus Christ and speak good news to us.  
You come in Jesus and assure us of your grace and forgiveness.  
May we never take this for granted, but rather may we be  
equipped and empowered by your Spirit to live holy lives  
that bring honour and glory to you.  
We pray in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ  
and in his words we pray together, saying...