

Trinity 10 – Faithfulness
St James, Colwall. 12th August 2007

In April last year, my wife and I had a very nice weekend in Vienna and one of the things we did while sight-seeing was to visit the Karlskirche, a huge baroque cathedral. The interior was being renovated during our visit and they had scaffolding up to restore the frescos on the dome, which must have been 200 feet above the floor. You could actually visit the restoration work – they had a platform perched on top of four columns, all made of stainless steel and quite slender. As I got into the lift to go to the top, I thought, I hope they have done the engineering stress calculations correctly – there didn't seem to be as much cross-bracing as I would have liked and this feeling was not helped by a certain springiness in the platform when we go to the top, which I have to say somewhat reinforced my feeling that the best course of action was to take the next lift back down.

Now I think this is a nice illustration of the difference between belief and faith. Of course I believed the engineers had done the right calculations, after all the restoration had been in progress for some years and they were busy making money from trips to see it, but 200 feet on top of 4 narrow columns was enough to sap my faith. So when we are talking about faith, we are talking about our hearts, whereas belief is about what goes on in our heads. Faith leads to action: belief is how we make sense of that action afterwards.

Faith is about living. We believe God created the world. The faith is expressed in how we respect it. We believe God is good. The faith is expressed in our integrity, in the way we live out God's commands to value good things and love our neighbour as ourselves. It seems to me that faith is more important than belief. Two different religions could actually be saying the same thing even though they have different beliefs provided the faiths are expressed in the same way. And people believing the same thing are following different religions if their faiths are expressed differently in their lives. It is faith which is the difficult thing about religion. We all know that the problem is not believing that we should love our neighbours, but rather in doing it. It is not the belief that goes wrong, but the faith and it is the faith which is important.

Now the next thing to take on board is that our *religious* beliefs are about God, the creator of the world and the source of good. As a result, our religious beliefs rationalise our values and goals. Our values govern our choices in life; our goals say where we are going. Now this religious faith is different from faith in other things. My lack of faith in the Karlskirche scaffolding was nothing to do with religion and more to do with psychology and a fear of heights. I expect that if I had put my mind to it, I could have overcome the fear, but that doesn't work for religion: you can't necessarily use rational thought to become a better Christian. The problem is that our religious beliefs are about God and that means they are about what we cannot know. Why are we here? What is the purpose in life? You can ask the question, but you can't necessarily expect to be able to understand the answer. So faith in religion is much more to do with taking a step in the dark than following a logical argument. I don't know what my purpose in life is, but I try to follow what seems to me to be God's will.

Our values and goals are what we learn from the family and from the world, but there are many choices and religions gather these choices together, sometimes challenging and sometimes reinforcing our prejudices. It is not surprising then that the idea of

God has meant different things at different times and as a result, faith has been expressed differently. The story of Abraham in our first reading has always puzzled me. Why should believing that you will have lots of descendants be accounted for righteousness? It sounds like the test of your religion was to believe in something impossible and the more impossible it was, the greater the faith. Now I do not believe that religion is a question of believing six impossible things before breakfast, although maybe the author of Genesis did to some extent think along these lines. I would prefer to interpret the story of Abraham as a story of a journey undertaken in faith, from Ur of the Chaldees to the promised land, a journey of daily encounters with God. Now I guess that Abraham did not believe in heaven and hell and maybe he could only express his goal in terms of the descendants he would leave. That was the goal as he saw it: it fitted in with the purposes of God. It was faith and as it says in Genesis, it was counted to him as righteousness.

For the author of Hebrews, the goal was also righteousness, but he is seeing the journey of faith as a journey to a heavenly city; a struggle in this life which would only be fulfilled in the next. And we can relate to that too. We know we shall never achieve the Kingdom of God on earth, but that does not mean we give up trying. This is certainly a test of faith today because the problems we face and the forces we struggle against are so great we are very tempted to give up. Hebrews has a message for us, for this wonderful chapter goes on:

And what shall I more say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and of Barak and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel and of the prophets:

Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouth of lions,

Quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens.

They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented;

of whom the world was not worthy.

As Winston Churchill said, we must never give in.

Now what does faith mean to us today, who understand so much more of our lack of understanding and can only be certain about the fact that we cannot be certain? How can we fight the good fight, if the trumpet is giving forth an uncertain sound?

The answer, it seems to me, is to focus on Jesus. We may not know the ultimate truth and maybe could not appreciate it if we knew it, but we can trust a person. And so to build up our faith we should read the gospels; and study the bible at large because, as the disciples learned on the road to Emmaus, it speaks of Jesus; and learn from the history of the church, of how our understanding has developed; and reflect in prayer on our lives and of the needs of the world and how we might work to meet them. For commitment is what faith is all about, not just now, not when we think about it, but how we live and throughout our lives. And we can achieve that commitment when we come to know Jesus the Son of God. And then we can join the angels around the throne to say, "Worthy is the Lamb of God."