

Sermon 29 May 2016

The readings today speak to us about faith.

The Old Testament story takes place during a time of famine in the Near East - a consequence of a long drought,

and help from the heavens is sought!

The question arises, who should the people turn to, Baal or Yahweh?

It is the old familiar story about when things get tough and old familiar ways don't seem to be working, people are apt to look elsewhere for help and a way to pass safely through their dilemma.

The leading light in the story is Elijah, the prophet of Yahweh.

There is a showdown at Mount Carmel between the prophets of Baal and Asherah who is the life giving mother of all gods and Elijah the prophet of Yahweh.

We have heard the details of the powerful winning display of Yahweh in the reading, and how the people returned to their faith in Yahweh as the one true God. "The Lord indeed is God" they all chanted.

The Psalm today also proclaims the Lords enthronement and all nations are called upon to enthrone God as the sole, universal God.

Now faith in the Old Testament is more often expressed by verbs such as believe, trust or hope. And in the Old Testament reading the show down between the false gods and Yahweh convinced the people beyond a shadow of a doubt that Yahweh was the one true God – the one to believe in, to trust and to hope in.

His powerful authority was revealed right before their eyes.

In the New Testament "faith" is much more common as a noun. It is the leading biblical term for the relationship humans are to have towards God.

In other words in Christianity, faith expresses the being of the whole person. For that reason, faith does not only express a learned or inherited way of life, but it reflects a mode of being of confidence, trust and assurance of the graciousness of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

We see this type of faith in the gospel reading today – in the centurion. The way of Faith, is the heart and focus of the reading.

To place the reading in context.

Jesus had just delivered his sermon on the plain and returned to Capernaum.

There Jesus is asked to heal the centurion's slave.

The centurion was a gentile, an officer in charge of around 100 men. He had heard about Jesus and the authority that he had.

He himself knew what it was to be under authority and he had recognised and accepted that Jesus' authority was of a different kind – of a higher order. Jesus only had to say the word and his slave would be healed.

The centurion's manner towards Jesus spoke of humility, confidence and unconditional trust. In faith he was assured of his goal – which was to surrender to the higher power, quite a feat for a soldier and leader of men, and seek the assistance of the one who could help him and save his slave.

Jesus was amazed at his faith the gospel tells us. Only this once in all four gospels do we hear Jesus marvelling at a person because of the strength of their faith. "I tell you not even in Israel have I found such faith".

As the story goes, Jesus heals the slave and in so doing breaks down the barriers that separate Jew and gentile and restores people again to life and community.

Faith in the grace of God in Jesus Christ is the corner stone of the Christian faith.

For it is through Christ that we are transformed into his likeness and therefore into the ways of true justice, integrity, morality and equity.

This is an important point and the very reason that the apostle Paul goes to such lengths to convince the believers in Galata.

He wants to set them on the right track. In the reading this morning, we hear that Paul rebukes them for deserting the one who called them - God through Christ.

He then explains that the new teaching that they had accepted was "a different gospel" and not compatible with his instruction.

Paul's opponents may have held that their teaching had been revealed by an angel in heaven, he says, but his revelation came from a higher source than any angel, it came from Jesus Christ. Paul implies that the teaching of his opponents, unlike his gospel, is of human origin and insists that the Galatians should have the right foundation – that of faith in God's grace in Jesus Christ.

I believe what the readings speak about in terms of faith in our personal lives is that there may be times when we are challenged to remain faithful – perhaps through personal loss or sickness or perceived abandonment, yet even in these times we can hold fast to the truth that the Spirit of Christ is still at work in us even in times of darkness and doubt.

And if we are confident that Christ is working in us during times of doubt and trouble we can have confidence that Christ is working in his church in all its troubles.

I believe in both the personal or corporate sense, we can be confident in our faith as the well spring of our being.

We can be assured that it forms us, that it inhabits our body, mind and spirit and allows us to move beyond the ties and confines of the world, just as the Centurion did in the gospel story.

Our life in faith is why we come here every week and some times more, and partake of the body and blood of Christ. It shapes our lives personally and forms us as a community of believers.

We are the body of Christ, his spirit is with us. And for such faith and the promises that it delivers to us, we give great thanks.

Pray the Collect together.

The Lord be with you.