

SERMON - 07/08/16
(ST JAMES'S 8, 9 & 10.30AM)

Texts: (Isaiah 1:1, 10-20)
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
Luke 12:32-40

Focus of text: Faith

Aim of sermon: To introduce changes to St James's and encourage a response of faith.

Title: Faith.

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May the word of God be spoken and heard. Amen.

Today I want to focus on the Hebrews reading and the theme of faith.

The writer of Hebrews starts this chapter with the words that are our sentence for today, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

And then he illustrates that by showing how faith was exercised in the lives of many notable Israelites.

One of his key examples is that of Abraham.

Abraham took the risk of leaving behind all that he knew and journeying to an unknown land, in faith that God had called him to do that.

He was prepared to make a huge change in his life, trusting in the promises of God.

The writer wasn't just telling the Christians he was writing to some interesting things about Abraham.

He wanted them to understand that they also needed to exercise faith when faced with the unexpected, unfamiliar or challenging experiences of life.

And he would want us to understand the same thing.

Sometimes these challenges come to us entirely unbidden. My family and I have recently been supporting my mother as she has had to face the challenge of ill health and the possibility that she may need to leave her home and go into some sort of supported living.

That's not normally anybody's preferred option and it's certainly not Mum's.

And so it's hard to witness that as Mum's son, and especially hard for her to experience it.

But in the midst of that challenge she is exercising faith - trusting that God is with her and knows her and loves her and will continue to provide what she most needs.

Of course, change can come to us in a more inviting way.

To some degree the change that Abraham was facing was under his control - he could choose to change or not.

He heard the call of God, was very probably scared by it but was excited by it too - and he chose to obey it.

He accepted the challenge and journeyed in faith to an unknown land, confident that God would be with him and Sarai and his nephew Lot in that new venture.

So whether the challenge we face is chosen or not, there is still something we can choose, and that is to have faith. We can recognise that we are still journeying with God - that God loves us and that, in whatever way God knows best, God will provide for us.

I have spoken about individuals up till now but there are plenty of challenges around for the church as well. We know that attendances have been declining in what you could call the historic or more traditional liturgical churches in the western world.

The Anglican Church is no exception

And to be more specific we are seeing that decline in our own province and in our own diocese and in our own parish.

Some time ago Bishop Justin drew this to our attention in a synod address.

He presented graphs such as the following one, that clearly showed declining attendances in the diocese.

*Show figures of decline.*

*[Speak to the graph so that people understand it (even if they can't see it properly).]*

There are lots of deeper reasons for this decline - some of which are out of the church's control, and some of which are within it.

One thing I want to focus on is that there is a clear demographic reason for this decline.

The decline relates to the average age of our parishioners.

*Show demographic information.*

*[Speak to the graph so that people understand it (even if they can't see it properly).]*

As I understand it, the high point of church attendance in New Zealand was the 1950s.

Those who were formed in faith in the 1950s and the decades before that and the decade after it have been our key group of long-term attenders, the pillars of the church. That is wonderful except for the fact that they are now growing older and are less and less able to be active in Christian ministry and witness.

If we want to have a church in 2050 and beyond, we have to address this challenge of an aging church and we have to change.

You could say that the necessity of change has been thrust upon us - but it's also a challenge that we need to choose, because we could take no notice and just keep on the way we're going until we sink, or the structure doesn't hold any more because we have lost too many of our core members.

We need to change because as the saying goes, "If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got."

The current way we are doing church is not working

We have had a long history of decline in attendance.

Something has to change or we will continue to get that decline.

So what needs to change?

That's a key question - because I believe that some things do need to change.

But also I think that we need to retain or even recover some things that are basic to our Christian practice.

Some of these are core things that relate to our identity as Christians in any age.

Bp Justin was specifically elected to help us to change as a diocese, so that we can be renewed as God's people and develop a new vision of what God is calling us to in this time and place.

The core change that Justin is aiming to bring to the diocese is a culture change and he has given us three aspects of Christian identity to focus on.

The three aspects are all included in the mission statement for the diocese that he uses, "We are family, we are disciples, we care for the last, the lost and the least.

The first aspect is that we are family and that means that we need to move from an "I-focus" to a "we-focus".

The determining factor is not what I want but what's best for us, because we are family.

If we are to be a family and to treasure the other family members, we will have to accept that things aren't going to be just as we want them all the time.

We will allow others to express their faith in ways that are relevant to them, not just separately, in another place where their preferences don't disturb us, but together, where we can get to know the other members of the family and encourage them in their journey of faith.

The second aspect is that we are disciples.

That means that we are people who seek to put God first and to do what God wants, not just what we think is best. This is a movement from "it's all about us" to "it's all about God."

As disciples we are seeking to relate our faith to the whole of our lives, and are growing in our ability to express that in all sorts of ways in our school and workplace and family and church and wider community.

The focus is on how we can be more like Jesus.

We are disciples.

The third element is that we care for the last, the lost and the least.

In other words, we move from an us-culture ("It's all about us") to what works for people out there in the world.

What worship do they need?

What refreshment and new insights and support can we bring them?"

What other ways can we serve those who need our care?

We need to keep asking those questions, so that we can be active in mission to those around us, as the church originally was in such a notable way.

And with this a whole lot of other questions bubble up.  
How are we going at making new people welcome in our church?

Are we finding out about their interests and inviting them to our homes, or to events that they would like to share in?  
Are we praying for those we meet, and helping them with their needs?

We care for the last, the lost and the least.

For me some of this is a constant challenge, but I'd have to say that it strikes me as so authentically Christian.  
It strikes me as the challenge that we are called to live out now, and so I don't lose hope, I grow in hope that God can use this new direction for our diocese and for our parish, and that something good from God can come out of it.

And I'm not the only one who is hopeful.

The parish Vestry is also hopeful and keen to take the risk of growing as family, as disciples and in caring for the last the lost and the least.

And so, today I have a major announcement of a new development in the parish, which we in Vestry hope and pray will lead to a change in our collective culture here at St James's.

I'd like to read out a letter that I have prepared for parishioners on behalf of Vestry.

You will be given your own copy of this letter, so that you can read it for yourselves afterwards.

*Read out the letter.*

I know that this will come out of the blue for many people. Other will have been thinking that something needs to change about the way we do things in the parish and may not be so surprised.

One real opportunity I see in combining the 9am and 10.30am services is that we can give ourselves permission to innovate and experiment, and to find new ways of being together in worship, discipleship and mission.

Vestry and I believe that we need to take that opportunity as something that God will be part of and that God can richly bless.

We have set a date of the start of November to begin that joint service, so there is plenty of time to consider things that need to be thought about and we welcome input about that to any of the members of Vestry.

And now let's pray together the prayer that you will find on the screens, which is slightly different from the collect in your service sheets: