8th Sunday after Trinity. Year C. Askham and Tockwith and LM

These are great readings today, and the stories and words running through them are in essence what keeps me going in my work; obviously the odd coffee and cake, or should that be wine, beer and chocolate, keep me physically going at times, but these words are what keeps me spiritually going. When I can’t fully understand something about my faith, or try and help someone else understand something that is troubling them, I refer to words similar to those found in Paul’s letter to the Hebrews. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

There is science behind our Christian belief, there is knowledge behind our Christian belief, but this science and knowledge only makes up a tiny portion of what we are to believe. For the rest we need a hope underpinned by the promises God, through the life and words of Jesus Christ, made and makes for each and every one of us. We are never going to be able to fully explain to someone certain aspects of our faith, and even if you were the greatest theological teacher, you wouldn’t be able to, so take these words this morning as an encouragement. You don’t need to have all the answers to have a strong faith. I believe that our faith is strengthened because of the fact we don’t have all the answers.

But what you have to also understand, and have the faith to follow, is like those first descendants of Abraham, you might not inherit all the promises here on earth that you are expecting, but like those first descendants you will receive them in heaven, because God has prepared a city for you there. We are so focused on our earthly life that sadly we do not see beyond our death. We do not understand the shortness of our earthly life compared to our heavenly one.

In the words written by Queen, people go around with the attitude *I want it all, I want it all, I want it all, and I want it now.* Sadly, the not now is rarely sung about or even talked about.

There are a couple of lines in the Gospel reading for today which to me sums up our Christian faith, these words are though, more thoroughly written out in Saint Matthews Gospel and are words that many will remember from their Book of Common Prayer days.

“Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon the earth, where the rust and moth doth corrupt, and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither rust nor moth doth corrupt and where thieves do not break through and steal.”

These words go to the core of why we do things, or more importantly for whom we are doing them. They remind me of times when somebody has done something and not been thanked enough and they have got upset, sadly they have been doing things for themselves or for the thanks and recognition rather than because the job needs doing not for the glory of a person, but for the glory of God. When we financially give to our church, or give of our time, we are not doing so for the church and the people, we are doing so for God, so it is God who you should be upset with when the thanks don’t come your way.

Our faith at times is so narrow and or defined that we lose track of what God wants for us and of us, even Abraham, the greatest perhaps of all of God’s followers and believers, at times had a narrow and humanly defined idea of his faith and purpose. Abraham and Sarah had lost the faith that they could have children of their own, even after God had told them that it would happen.

Faith is perhaps best described as ‘the substance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen’. Faith should inspire us, and is both mysterious and suggestive. One thing that it can never be is an answer at the touch of a button, or an immediate response, and that is why people have an issue with faith in this day and age. People are so used to getting an immediate response and if they don’t get one or they don’t get the answer they wanted they move on. Faith believes that God exists and that the visible world was created by the word of God. God’s purposes are invisible because God’s ways are higher than our own. In Hebrews 11 it declares that even though we cannot see God’s presence and love, God still rewards all those who seek Him out. We don’t gain His rewards by doing those things seen by others, but by doing those things unseen, those unheard things that only God knows about.

In essence Rewards are invisible in the sense that they are in the future, we might know the reward, or have seen the reward, but we don’t know how it fits into our life and being until we actually have it. Abraham’s reward for his patience and devoted following of God is a son, Isaac, a reward though that then brings about very mixed emotions when God asks Abraham to sacrifice him on the mountain. The greatest reward that Abraham could have wished for now becomes the greatest burden he can carry. Just look at the sad stories in the press about the lottery winners whose lives have been changed because of large wins. Unfortunately not changed for the better. Their hopes had been for a life changing amount of money and when it comes the changes are not necessarily the ones they had dreamt about.

The bible teaches that our very reason for being is to have a life together with God. A quality life with God requires faith, not in the sense of mere beliefs, because even devils agree that God exists and is the creator and rewarder; but in the sense of personnel commitment, or to use biblical language a covenant love and faithfulness. Abraham believed God enough to leave home, to get on board with God’s programme for him and his family without fully understanding what is was. 25 years of travelling with God at the helm so rooted Abrahams confidence in God that he was willing to sacrifice the child of such promise, because he believed that as the author of life God could raise from the dead.

We do not remember Abraham because of God’s promise to him that he will have as many offspring as there are stars in the sky, that he was to become the father of many nations, but we remember him because he was a true friend of God. Abraham’s intimate acquaintance with God was what made him sure that life was worth living and that he could be sure that his future family would be cared for.

God is faithful to His people because who and what He is. God loves everybody and everything, but his true being and nature is only fully seen by those who allow Him total access into their lives. People of great faith do not rise to the occasion through their own strength, but because God acts in many and various ways, noticed and unsuspected, enabling them to persevere to the end. Karen didn’t get through the past ten years of discernment and training just by the love and support of Simon, the girls and her friends and family, she got through those ten years because she listened to God, listened to God’s guidance, acted and reacted to His support and ultimately followed the ultimate promise that all will be well if only we fully surrender to our Lord God and totally realise that what we do here on earth is only a starting point to our love of an eternal God.

The Gospel reading finishes off by talking about being ready for our death, and yes that is an important juncture of our life with God, but we don’t know when that will happen, and we shouldn’t worry about the fact that it will happen. God wants us to be prepared for the future, but I truly believe that he wants us to totally enjoy the present, yes think about the future, respect and learn from the past, but listen to God in the here and now and act upon His words. Our treasures in heaven are so much more of worth than any treasure we can form here on earth.

Have faith, have courage but above all have patience. The Christian life is often lived more in waiting and hope than in results. Our journey of discipleship is measured over the entire course of life; it can take a long time for us to appreciate just how much God has called us to do. It takes devotion to understand that calling is not about affirmation or success, but that it is all about faithfulness. Come wind, rain or sunshine all we are ever called to do is walk with our Lord.