

Living in Hope

Romans 4.18 Abraham believed and hoped, even when there was no reason for hoping.

Bigger Discipleship

Jim stood in a pile of rubble - his DIY home conversion - 'It's a bigger job than I thought!'

Maybe that's not unlike how the first disciples of Jesus felt.

Thrust into the limelight as followers and helpers of the most popular preacher, teacher and healer of their time they had seen people healed, and lives changed.

They had hopes of a new world Kingdom far exceeding the extent and power of the Roman empire

But now they were at a turning point. Jesus would soon be leaving the popularity of Galilee. He began to explain how his Kingdom would come about.

He told them it would involve hardship,

sacrifice,

suffering,

self-denial, death

- a Cross!

Discipleship had become much bigger than they had anticipated when Jesus first said *Come. Follow me!*

Increasing Hardship

It has not changed!

Christians are experiencing great persecution in many parts of the world today, especially with the rapid increase of fundamentalist political Islam

And there is that increasing hardship for us as we Christians become the *odd people* in our society and the Church being side-lined in our society

Surely not this way!

Peter expressed the feeling of himself and the other disciples when he took Jesus aside .. *Lord, surely not this way! You're surely not going to throw away all the progress we've made so far? Who do you think will follow you along a path which leads to a Cross!?*

But Jesus insists and in fact reprimands Peter

Peter, that's the way people think. That's the way the world builds kingdoms, expressions of physical power, of domination by wealth and status and popularity.

My Kingdom is the realm of God's love which operates on a different plane

- a kingdom which will survive everything which militates against it.

But there has to be the time between

Jesus said, the way of love involves

Following me - learning to be like me

- to be like God - holy - all love

Learning to forget yourself - your needs

- your ambitions - your yearnings for power and possessions

Learning to be the cross-carriers

- learning to get hurt for the sake of others,

for Jesus and the kingdom

This way of Jesus – this way of the Kingdom - is a much bigger and costlier thing than we ever thought we were taking on

How can you persuade the world today,
that love is more powerful than weapons,
that love is of greater value than the greatest banker's fortunes?
What hope is there for the way of love in today's world?

With Peter we are being asked to believe the humanly impossible
We are being asked to believe in love - to hope in God
Whom Paul reminds us is God of Hope [Rom 15.13]

That takes us back to Abraham

Facing the Impossible

Abraham faced the impossible!
God made a covenant with him
*Live in obedience to me –serve and honour me
And I will be with you. I will provide for you
AND I will make you the ancestor of many nations*

Think of the context:
Ancestor of many nations!?
At ninety-nine years of age! Without a family! Sarah, his wife elderly too!
BUT Abraham hoped with hope grounded in Faith and Love

Paul writes of him:
*He did not doubt God's promises
His power – his strength – came from the tenacity of his trust in God
His faith enabled him to praise God, even when the bottom dropped out of his world
He was absolutely sure of God's way of doing things
He believed and hoped even when there was not reason to hope*

Paul could write to Christians at Corinth [1 Cor 13]
Faith, hope, love – these three abide - i.e. live together as a unity
They are the heart of things

e.g St Faith's King's Lynn – window in lady chapel – the charities – the female figures of faith, hope and love. Hope is in the middle. You cannot have hope if it is not accompanied by faith and love

There are no degrees or other qualifications in faith, hope and love
They are gifts from God for all - for the smallest infant to the most aged person
Above all things we are people who live in hope
In the line of Abraham

Living in Hope

So what was it about Abraham's hope against hope which made him so strong and faithful?

Faith in God's Promise

Abraham's hope had its basis in his trust in God's word to him
Even his wife, , Sarah, understandably, laughed at him and the idea of him as 'father of nations'!

Imagine her busy about household things, saying to herself, 'Silly old fool!'
But for Abraham – God had spoken

So many of the saints and Christian pioneers through the years have built their success for the Kingdom of God on their faith in the Word of God

*e.g. Hudson Taylor – China etc. – incredible man of faith and miracle:
He had a simple creed: I believe in God. I believe he has spoken in his word.
I believe he will do what he says.*

Our hope for Christ and his Church is based on his words – the Word of God
On our belief that his way of LOVE
Of sacrifice and self-giving as the way to a new world of peace and harmony
Of truth and holiness
- its all there in his word
Our hope is strengthened by our trust in his words
As indeed it is in every personal, or family trial, or difficulty
Whatever comes
We hold on to God's promise that the Kingdom of Love will conquer at the last

When it is all over – there is still love
THAT is our hope for ourselves, the church, the world!

*And we have a sign
- the Cross - of a risen and living Saviour, Jesus Christ.*

Faith in God

However, it is very difficult to trust the words of someone we do not know!

However difficult it is to trust others in our contemporary society, we are most likely to trust someone we know and respect, from family or community.

Abraham's hope was based on his faith in God **whom he knew**.
His faith empowered him to praise God,
to honour him
to give him first place in his life
And in that assurance he was able to hope in the face of hopelessness

It is that same relationship which Jesus spoke of when he called his men to follow him along the way of the cross
Leave self behind
put me – put God first
learn to die to yourself and be alive with God's life - with his Spirit

*e.g. Iris Murdoch in Henry and Cato
The self has to break at some point after that there's darkness and silence and space ... and God is there. When you have nothing left you have nothing left but hope.*

Let our discipleship - like Paul - be full of hope because it is *No longer I who live, but Christ Jesus who lives in me so that that life we live is lived by faith in the one who loves us and gave himself for us.*



Think Big

John 2.19 I will build it again

In the Temple

The Good News Bible has a heading for this episode which is like a child's first reader - *'Jesus goes to the Temple'*

It could almost suggest a tourist having a gentle stroll round the magnificent building, taking in its more interesting features, before having a glass of wine in the outer-court cafe!

Certainly not! A news headline would suggest *'Messiah comes to the House of God and tears it apart !*

If it had happened in a Cathedral today the media would discover all sorts of interesting and confused stories of what actually happened and initiate days of debate as to what it was all about and how the authorities should have dealt with it.

Angry God?

Theologians and preachers still debate the events of the original story of Jesus in the Temple

was he really 'angry' - does God get 'angry' ?

was it really a moment of teaching - a visual aid - as many Rabbi's would understand it.

That would seem the more likely explanation because it did lead to a discussion with the authorities rather than Jesus being instantly evicted.

It is that discussion which we need to hear

Too often we get absorbed in arguing the facts of the story and miss what it is all about

Assuming the authorities, the religious leaders, accepted Jesus' actions as teaching, their first words are not - *'what do you think you are doing?' of 'get out of here' or 'clear up this mess.'*

- but, *'What authority do you have for your actions?' If you do have authority as a prophet, or as a person specially chosen by God, give us some sign of your power*

Jesus then and always refused to work miracles to prove his authority - he would not do it for the devil and he was not doing it here. It was not necessary.

You will know my authority, he said. Knock down this Temple and it will be rebuilt in three days!

He was speaking of his own body - his coming cross and resurrection by which everyone could know he was God and Lord.

But they couldn't get their minds round that - the Temple for them was stones and mortar, cedar and gold adorned with treasures gathered from around the world.

Their reply: *'It took forty-six years to build this Temple! Three days! You're mad!*

And Jesus would no doubt say again today:

The Temple is more than a building

Life is more than the body

And so the passage presents two important questions for us:
Would your religious life - your faith - survive without a building?
Would you survive without a body?

Without a building ?

Would your faith survive without a building ?

We know that the real church is Christ's people and not the building, but getting rid of the structures can be a real test of faith.

Many times through the years Christians have been deprived of the structures and have shared Paul's words;

Writing to Christians at Philippi he says - *I have a great religious heritage - a Jew - a Pharisee - a leader - called by God - steeped in faith and religion - but I would be willing to renounce all that if necessary - because I would still have Jesus*

We need not worry about closed Church buildings it simply means the church is changing - it dies to be reborn - God is having another of his resurrection moments!

If ours is a true fellowship in Christ - built on personal faith - it will survive changes - and will continue long after the structures have changed or even disappeared.

Without a body ?

Would you survive without a body?

We say yes to that question when we repeat the Creed - *I believe in the resurrection of the body - that is the body suited to spiritual life and what we call 'heaven'*

That is our faith

Paul says - *'to live is Christ, to die is gain!'*

His and our great assurance based on faith in Jesus

Who said - *destroy my body and in three days I'll be back!*

And he was!

Life in Christ means knowing his Spirit in our hearts - in us - is to **have** eternal life - life that is full and for ever.

In a culture where the emphasis is on bodily satisfaction, we tend to miss the spiritual realities of life, and so we fear death as an *unknown*, rather than as a door to a whole new experience of LIFE!

Destroy this body and I shall live - I am a survivor in Christ!

The underlying factor

Yes we will survive - individually and as a church
because we believe in the resurrection

But that faith depends on one thing
our relationship with God in Jesus Christ

the Church survives because **it is his Church**
we survive because **we belong to him**
through believing in him
and experiencing the power of his cross and resurrection

Us and him

the most intimate relationship, enlarged by faith and prayer, love and worship and living in the scriptures.

I have a picture of a man standing beside the remains of his house, following an earthquake. He has a pencil and an old envelope in his hands. He is designing his new home!

That's how the Christian sees the dying times of church and personal life
- opportunities for rebuilding

In Christ - we shall survive !



Year B Lent 4

John 3: 14-21

"Towards Commit"

John 3.15 Everyone who believes in Jesus may have eternal life

Commitment

In space-craft terms 'commit' is the launching moment when countdown is complete - zero is substituted with 'lift-off'. "*We have commit*"
- the point of no turning back - if it goes wrong now it fails !

I believe that to be what Jesus meant by "believe" i.e. *be committed*
- go past the point of no return
- surrender everything to me
- take the risk of giving your life to me - to God

Eternal Life is Commitment

As Jesus explained to Nicodemus
A complete - full and forever - life (eternal life) - is a matter of commitment

Eternal life - the real life
- the God life
- the spiritual life - the life of peace with God and oneself
in the knowledge of sins forgiven and of death as the entry to a greater life

Incredible to think that people are living without knowing
the certainty of God
that they are forgiven
that they have heaven's life always
the joy and privileges of that life
the thrill of being in tune with God's love
and being filled with the Spirit of Jesus

and all because they cannot have 'commit' !

Nicodemus

Nicodemus was like that

Although we cannot be sure of his real motives for coming to Jesus

We do believe that he was a secret follower of Jesus

- after the Cross he joined with Joseph of Arimathaea in providing for Jesus' burial

tradition has it that he was one of the two disciples who walked with Jesus and met him
in the village of Emmaus on the first Easter evening

Nicodemus a wealthy man

- from an aristocratic family

- a Pharisee

- a renowned and popular teacher

who was fascinated by Jesus and his teaching

who acknowledged with a more open mind than many of his colleagues

that Jesus was from God

who seems to have been aware that Jesus possessed a life which he was missing

Jesus explained simply

You have to experience a new-birth

Not enough just to have religion

You need to be alive with God's life

Like being born all over again

Nicodemus fudges - *How?*

In embarrassment - talks about natural birth again

Jesus explains - you have to believe and accept

Just 'commit'

How to keep from commitment

Nicodemus is held from making that commitment

- from really understanding and believing for the same reasons some people have
always held back

and still do today

Being Religious

The fact that Nicodemus was religious may have been his greatest obstacle

Nicodemus was held back by his understanding of religion

- Jesus didn't fit properly into that

God never fits comfortably into human religion

For Nicodemus Jesus was too revolutionary

not giving the same priority to religious observance and ritual

- he was only a *Rabbi* - a teacher

not doing religion in the right (established) way

and keeping the law in the most minute detail

Sadly there are still those who miss the gift of eternal life

because of how they understand *religion*

miss the experience of a living and personal faith in God

because religious security prevents them taking risks

Keeping on Talking

is another sure way of putting off commitment

Keep discussing religion

Keep looking for a reasoned statement of God and religious experience

Keep trying to squeeze God into words

Nicodemus was ready to debate

to keep talking about miracles

about '*glimpse's* of God

about Messianic claims

Some still keep asking questions

about how a person is saved - made right with God

about the coming of the Spirit

maybe as a reason to defer a personal act of commitment

Jesus says - feel the wind -you can't explain it - has to be felt and seen

Hanging on to Life

Life for Nicodemus was good

prosperity - success

-everything he needed of wealth and position

surely God looked favourably on all that

But Jesus challenges him about real life - eternal life

You have to be ready to die to all that material life

and be born all over again in spiritual life

Nicodemus surely realised how much he had to give up

- how much of self had to die

No 'Commit'

The same factors still prevent people knowing the blessings of a born again Christian life

I'm doing the religious thing!

I need to understand before I commit!

I can't risk letting go of myself and my hold of this life!

But think of what could be MISSED!

Jesus' must have been so saddened by Nicodemus and all whom he represents

I hope it really was Nicodemus who met Jesus on the Emmaus Road !

We have commit !

Following the meeting with Nicodemus, John on to comment

God loved the world so much.....

He gave himself to live and die for us - ALL of us

Jesus' Incarnation and Passion were God's COMMIT

- the end of thousands of years of "Countdown"

He asks for that same COMMIT from us

- he calls it believing - faith born of love



Year B Lent 5

Psalm 51: - 12

"Face to Face"

Psalm 51.1 Be merciful to me, O God .. of constant love.

The background to the psalm is in 2 Samuel 11 & 12

King David is accused by God , through the prophet Nathan

11.27 The Lord was not pleased with what David had done

That is his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah the Hittite

12.15 The Lord has judged you the Lord forgives you.

But that's not on the scale of any wrong I would do!

Yet Jesus said there isn't a measuring scale for sin - wrong is wrong!

He puts lust in the same sin-parcel as adultery,

and hate in the same category as murder. [Matthew 5]

Equally we know moments of conviction when like David, we are made aware that we

are sinner's in God's sight and want things to be put right

to know forgiveness - restitution - rehabilitation

to shower away the stains

Face to Face

David's experience gives us guidelines as to how to manage such *conviction times*
By accepting them as face to face moments
Face to face with ourselves
Face to face with God

Face to face with himself

I know my faults
- they have been made known to me
- much of it is public knowledge
It has been like this all my life!

*But in your presence I also know what I **want** to be.*
I want to be clean / holy
I want my mind to be full of your wisdom (sin originates in the mind!)
I want to rejoice and be happy again - lifted from guilt's depression
I want a pure heart
In want to be loyal - obedient to you
I want to live close to you and let my life be full of your Spirit
I want to know I am saved, reconciled and free
I want to offer you willing obedience
I want to show your truth and love and holiness in my life
So that I can bring others back to you too.

Above all I want to give you my life in true humility
because that counts far more than any religious or charitable activities.

What a prayer!

Face to face with God

Nathan the prophet has the difficult task of bringing the King face to face with God but David had already been there.

He knew his God ...
Be merciful to me O God
You require sincerity and truth
I recognize my faults
I have sinned against YOU!
You are right to judge me - justified in your condemnation of my sins

An awesome realisation, not only of selfish disobedience of God's laws, but of having offended his very nature and being - **my sin is against God!!**

As we have discovered him through Jesus the awfulness of our failure is that it brings him to the eternal Cross - his pain for love of those who sin against him.

But David knew more of his Lord that this

He knew and was assured by the words of the prophet Nathan
God WILL forgive those who are truly penitent

Of course, with all that forgiveness implies in reconciliation, restitution, healing of relationships on our part. For which God gives strength and wisdom.

*Lord, you have crushed me. You have broken me,
but I will be happy again
I will find a new life in worshipping you
in loving and serving your people*

The sinners assurance

David's sin was forgiven and *forgotten* by God
But remembered by him and by all generations since
as a testimony to the amazing grace of God
The Lord has judged you The Lord forgives you!

And we have the added assurance
[1 John 1] *The blood of Jesus, God's Son, purifies us from every sin.... If we confess our sins to God he will keep his promise and do what is right: he will forgive us our sins and purify us from all wrongdoing.*



Year B Palm Sunday *Mark 11:1-11*

“Donkey Man”

Mark 11.7 They brought the donkey [colt] to Jesus

The Donkey Man!

Micah gasped for breath. He pushed his tear-stained face between his father and the other man, careful to keep his feet between those of the men. It was the other man standing on his big toe which had made his eyes water.

'*Get back, Micah!*' His father put out his arm to stop the boy getting more than his head past him. The three of them crushed into a recess in the city wall to avoid the crowd surging along this narrow street.

Dad had pulled Micah in as soon as he had seen the soldiers heading the crowd - he didn't want trouble today - and the other man obviously sharing his thought, had squeezed in beside them.

The small round face, bright eyed and bronzed peered out between the two men. He couldn't get a hand free to wipe the drying tears. Micah saw the soldiers pass. It seemed almost quiet. The noisy people were further back along the street. Behind the soldiers came a man. His head raised - pulled back by the weight of the wooden beam he carried on his shoulders - his eyes, bruised and swollen, he stared ahead at the soldiers. His face was full of bitterness as he tried to mouth words at them. Micah knew where they were going. The man was to be nailed to the wooden beam. They were on their way to skull hill. There was a gap in the crowd then and Micah could just turn his head to see the next group coming along the street. Why were the priests there in their robes, just behind the soldiers? Then he saw the prisoner. The man stumbled and fell forward right by their hiding place. Immediately a soldier lashed out at the man, 'Get up,' he ordered him, cracking his whip across the man's back. The brown homespun cloak he wore did nothing to soften the blow.

As the man raised himself and the beam, his eyes met Micah's. It was not an angry face, like that of the first man. This face was all sadness. Micah saw the blood stains and the circle of thorns, like a crown. A crown! For a king! Suddenly it all clicked into place in his mind and Micah cried out, almost screamed, 'Dad! It's the donkey-man!'

All in a moment he remembered the scene of days before; at the city gate with his friends; the procession; the man on the donkey. Someone had given him a palm branch; he shouted with them - *The king, the king, Praise God, the King has come;* people all around were saying the same - the King has come; they had followed him to the Temple. The Rabbi, they called him had been there again the next day - telling stories to the children; laughing with them..... Now Micah was bewildered. What had happened? Why was the king carrying a cross? They were going to kill him! There were real tears now. He grasped his father's hand. 'Dad. *It's the donkey man, the king. Can't we stop them! Do something!*

The other man, who had stepped on Micah's toes, replied before Micah's father could speak. 'There's nothing we can do lad, except get out of here as soon as we can. You won't stop what's happening now. They'll treat him no better than an ass. He's a donkey man all right!

Donkey association

I think Jesus would have appreciated the association with the donkey.

Tradition has given us a picture of the donkey as misunderstood - both loved and despised - seen as silly, stubborn, awkward

BUT only because

the donkey is usually a most gentle and sensitive creature - the hardy, content, burden-bearer.

There is so much of Jesus and his passion in that description

- so much of the nature of God as we saw him in his Son

Just as the donkey is

Sensitive, gentle, loving

so Jesus showed us the gentleness of God

awesome in majesty, power and judgment

*God of thunderous love.
Creator of a universe bigger than human minds can grasp
who cares
who feels our hurts
who gets alongside us
who bears our load*

Just as the donkey is

Contented, trusting, humble accepting

So Jesus showed us our God who left the glory of heaven
to be humbled
to share our life in all but sin
to know our weaknesses
- to be God with us - one of us
- *so that we could get alongside him as a person to be known and loved*

Just as the donkey

Carries heavy loads

So Jesus showed us how God bears our sorrows, pains, and even our sins
*Come to me all who carry heavy loads
I will give you rest - I'll take the heavy end of the yoke*

Bearing a cross
The donkey bears the cross
- the marks on back and shoulders - even the tear stain
- and the marks on each foot - like the marks of the nails
Reminding us of the cross - Jesus, suffering - for our sins
- the victory over evil and death - for us
which is at the heart of our understanding of God - our knowledge of Jesus
of all he IS and all he has done for us

The marks of God are in the donkey
I quite envy the donkey

Donkey People - Donkey Church

To share in the Palm Sunday procession and worship
is in fact a reminder that we are called to be the Donkey People !

The Donkey Church !

Paul, speaking of the humbling of Jesus [Philippians 2] says
*You should have the attitude that Christ Jesus had
- share his life - share his nature - live in God's love - be filled with the Holy Spirit*

Of course, unlike Jesus, many of us may well have those other supposed donkey characteristics of the stubborn self-will at times !

But united to Jesus by faith
We share the same sensitive, loving nature
the same contented trust in God the Father
the same strength and resilience in living
the same willingness to share the burdens of others
the same acceptance of the marks of the cross in every part of our Christian life

[Paul - bearing in his body the marks of the cross... Galatians 6.17]

For this is the message of the King on his donkey
Peace comes in us
through the sacrifice of Jesus - reconciling us to him
and peace comes in the world
and in every human relationship
as God-peace is shared
by love, sacrifice and burden-bearing in all his followers
- *meaning us!*

In a word Christian life is all about

first letting Jesus carry our load - bear our sins - to bring us to God

then free from the personal burden
We learn to carry the loads of others - bringing them to him
Sharing their joys and sorrows

Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ [Paul]

The way for the Church

This is the way for the church
Not expecting privileges for being Christ's people
But realising it may mean persecution to follow him
As Jesus lived and explained - *we and the church are not here to be served but to serve*
- *and to sacrifice* - **to be the donkey people**

And that way of Jesus has an immense appeal today.

What does it mean for us to be the church of the donkey people in this place?

The answer will affect our thinking about:

Worship Buildings Mission Our neighbour The world

*As we discover the church existing for others
Being community in community - Christ in his world*

We shall win the world by loving it
- like Jesus
- with a strong, burden-bearing, cross-carrying 'donkey-love' !