

Thoughts for 4th June.

All about Faith

We've had another week of glorious weather and while I'm sure we all enjoyed it, I'm equally certain that many of us - only the British - have commented on it being "unseasonable" too! Which, on reflection is somewhat ungrateful of us.

Those of us who are BBC Countryfile addicts will have seen how the farmers are struggling with less rain than usual and deep down understand that while we may not voice their grumblings about it, we know full well, that later in the year we'll "pay the piper" as we experience the shortages of veg and the like in the shops, probably also commenting then that those shortages are also "unseasonable"! Thus we certainly can have faith that our unique climate will be inconvenient to some or all of us at any given moment..

Curious too, that at the same time many are also this year grumbling about the fact that the Covid Lockdown means they couldn't take planned or intended holidays where a large component would be hot, sunny, weather.... Would anyone honestly trade security from catching this deadly disease, with days spent in the sun whether in the UK or elsewhere?? It just shows that logic has little to do with analysis of a given situation! However, we can definitely have faith in the age old truism.... you can't please all the people all the time.

Moving on to the nub of today's "Thoughts for the Day" (or TFTD as I use shorthand for at home), the Lectionary for today gives us readings from Genesis 22 and Hebrews 11. Both have the same theme and that is - FAITH.

What is Faith? If you search dictionaries or Thersaureses (Thesaurii?) , they will advise that "Faith is Complete trust or certainty in something or someone, based on conviction or belief irrespective of whether there is conclusive proof accepted by everyone" or something like this.

Given the uses of the term in the opening paragraphs of this note, we can see that in the one case we are certain, needing no further proof, that our weather will often be inconvenient for whatever plans we might have, and in the other case it means we have certainty that often the reaction of society is irrational. In both cases thereby managing our own expectations.

However faith in a religious context isn't about necessarily believing or accepting something because we have empirical data over a long span of time to show trends - remember the science of statistics has only been around for a hundred years or so. In fact in terms of our belief, we have the Bible and subsequent actions, sayings, writings through the last two millennia to base our "Faith" upon. It's clear that the question of having faith in God and Jesus has been a topic that the followers have had to work out for themselves and it's a continual "Work in Progress".

The example related in Genesis, is that of Abraham taking his son, Isaac, off into the desert with the sole intention of demonstrating his total obedience to his new God even to the point of sacrificing his only son!

Now Abraham wasn't born a believer in our God.. He was a convert. He took all his herds, his family, his possessions, and set off across the desert all on the basis of a "promise" by this new deity he'd encountered. That was a huge act of faith as he had no evidence to ensure he wasn't dreaming it all. He may have been the only one in his family who had this faith, but in those days, where the head of the household went, everyone just followed along.

Then his new God tells him that he and his wife, Sarah, are to have a Son. Given that he was well past the age of fathering children and she was well past child bearing age, one can forgive her scepticism at that news. Abraham didn't question this due to his faith and once she became pregnant then she had reason to believe and have faith. The story ends well in that upon the remote mountain God sees Abraham's steadfast faith in him and also Isaac's utter faith and

acceptance in his father's actions, and spares them both by providing a lamb to take Isaacs place as the offering. Relief all round I'm sure.

The second reading in Hebrews 11, relates the story of Abraham and Sarah to the Jews in the time following Christs death and resurrection. Given that Jesus had instructed the disciples to go and preach to the Jews in Jerusalem and the surrounding area and not initially focus on the Samaritans and Gentiles as we read in the passages last week, the focus was to get more of the Jews to understand their own history and Laws in the most straightforward way and then they would better understand the teaching of Jesus during his ministry and the Good news message that his disciples were spreading, particularly following Pentecost. In particular the reading from Hebrews says:

By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.

⁹By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise:

¹⁰For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

And then

¹²Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable.

¹³These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

¹⁴For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country.

¹⁵And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned.

¹⁶But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

The key here is in verse 13 where it says of the descendants of Abraham and Isaac :

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them...

Just like Noah who built his Ark on faith, and Abraham's wife and family and their descendants who had not received any promise directly from God, but understood the promise was something better to come along and maybe not in their lifetime they still believed it and acted in faith thereafter. This is the "Country" that is referred to in verse 14. It's not the physical country they came from - they could go back there any time - but the heavenly country in God's promise.

What is being said to the Hebrews in Jesus's time is if the forefathers of the nation could have such faith in God they would physically move, lock, stock, and barrel, to a country a long way away never having been there before, and believe he would bring a better tomorrow, they should listen to the teaching of Jesus and equally have faith in the promises by the God of Israel and of all nations on the earth.

For us, faith is to understand and believe that following the teaching of Christ will lead us to a better tomorrow. Christ said innumerable times that for the faithful, their reward was in heaven and we need to trust, have faith, in that promise. It wasn't a conditional promise saying that everything would be rosy in life, but if we, like Abraham, remain steadfast in our faith, we have an assurance that we move to a better tomorrow.

When we encounter obstacles in life (and I don't just mean the weather or Covid19), holding on to our faith will enable us a path through the bad times. When it is said that "Faith can move mountains", it might be a literal saying but the mountain might instead be our perception of seeming insurmountable worry, and faith may give us an approach to deal with the underlying causes of that worry and so remove the mountain.

Perhaps in the current "mountains" context, faith tells us that there will be rain enough for the farmers, and sun enough for our enjoyment and with patience, the inconveniences of the lockdown will be soon forgotten and are a small price to pay to prevent further deaths? Our Faith is no less real because we cannot point to concrete evidence does it? Keeping our faith is a long road and a constant "work in progress" as we can be sure to be frequently tested or challenged in life. But we should have faith that the benefits ultimately far outweigh any temporary discomfort during our life here on earth.