

# Homily for Parishes in the Western Region without clergy

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> August 2019, Pentecost 9

Readings: Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

Psalm 50:1-8, 23-24

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Luke 12:32-40

There are many different ways of reading Biblical writing, and one approach I find particularly helpful is to read through a passage a couple of times and see if there is a phrase or some words that particularly resonate. Sometimes this happens quickly, and other times I have to sit with it for a while. Then it's good to do some background reading to get a reasonable sense of when it was written, who it was written by, and who it was written for. With that background new insight is gleaned about the phrases and words that originally resonated. There is some sense of what the passage might have meant to its original audience, and a growing sense of what it might mean for me, and the community of faith that I'm seeking to teach.

The author of the 'Letter to the Hebrews' was writing to a first century Christian community who were experiencing hardship, and who were wondering why the promised return of Jesus hadn't happened. The letter is organised into four sections, and the reading from chapter eleven this week comes from the third section which encourages people to have faith. Indeed, the Greek word for faith occurs twenty seven times in this chapter. Consequently, 'faith' was one of the words that resonated when I first read the text early in the week! There is also the familiar motive of journeying in a life of faith, and the less familiar longing for a city.

The opening verse is rich and familiar for it affirms that *'faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.'* This is a balm for the very human experience of unanswered prayer. For, when we pray asking that our lives, or the lives of others, be blessed in some way and the prayer is answered in the way we hoped – it's easy to have faith. But, when we pray and things do not go the way we hoped: we do not get the job; the marriage falls apart; our beloved family member dies in pain; the drought breaking rains do not fall; and peace does not come to the country in which there is terrible violence. When our prayers are not answered in the way we hoped, it's much harder to have faith in a God, whose very nature we understand to be love.

In verse three the writer continues *'by faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible...'* For anyone who loves science this is a fantastic affirmation because we have a very good understanding that all physical things are made up of atoms that cannot be seen by the naked eye. But, about four hundred years before the letter to the Hebrews was written the Greek philosopher, Democritus, had intuited that all matter had to be made up of small units that could not be cut up. A unit which he called an atom! I think it's amazing that he intuited and reasoned this and that when it was confirmed two thousand two hundred years later the name was atom, which means indivisible, continued to be used. I guess all those chemistry students among us, who love the Periodic Table, will find their hearts, 'strangely warmed' by this news!

The writer to the Hebrews goes on to talk about the faith of Abraham who left his home, where everything was comfortable, to journey to a new place guided by God. Along the way God promised Abraham many descendants, and a land much better than the one he had left. The inevitable motif of 'journey' that comes from this is very helpful because it reminds us of God being present throughout the seasons of life. For even when we do not often move from one place to another, or work many jobs, change in life is something we can be sure of! The cycle of seasons occurs each year, our bodies' age, our children grow up, our parents die... and through it all... we keep going. There may be seasons when we run strongly, and

others when we drag ourselves along on our knees... but, we keep going. And we keep going, like the Old Testament characters Abraham and Sarah, trusting that God is with us every step of the way.

Then the writer does something quite unexpected and which I think is quite a leap. He suggests in verse thirteen that the Old Testament people of faith, like Abraham and Sarah, *'confessed they were strangers and foreigners on earth'* who longed for a heavenly country. Earlier in verse ten, he suggests that they *'looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.'* The inference is that we will never find our home on earth, and that our real home is in a future place with God.

The words that translators choose are really important and particularly in this verse. The New Revised Standard Translation chooses to translate the Greek as 'strangers and foreigners on earth', while the King James translation has, 'strangers and pilgrims on earth'. Looking at the Greek dictionary 'strangers' seems to be accurate, but it translates the second word with the old fashioned word 'sojourners' which I think speaks more about the experience of pilgrimage than being foreign.

But, this longing to live in a heavenly city... I think is a stretch. Would Abraham, who spent his life living in tents moving from place to place, have longed to live in a densely populated city? There seems to be an inferred bias in this understanding against the experience of encountering God in the natural world. There is a longing for a new Jerusalem city, first expressed in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 48:35), and a longing for a heavenly Jerusalem expressed in the New Testament book of Revelation (Revelation 21:10).

The Bible seems to begin with a story in Genesis that imagines human beings living in harmony with God in a garden, and ends with a vision of human beings living in harmony with God in a city. It's an interesting shift as to where human beings have imagined God to be present: in the garden, and then the city; in the past, and then in the future? In our time do we imagine that we will only live with God in a future reality of a new heaven, or do we understand God to be present with us in each moment of our lives now?

In Luke's Gospel Jesus affirmed to his disciples then, and now, that the Kingdom of God is within them (Luke 17:21). Not something in the past, or something yet to come, but something present now, in your life and mine. In many ways I think the threefold Memorial Acclamation that we use in Eucharistic worship is incomplete because it does not affirm the presence of Christ in the midst of the gathering. If this was included it might say, 'Christ has died. Christ is risen. **Christ is here.** Christ will come again.' Like an unspoken SBS sub-title I think this whenever I say the Memorial Acclamation, and would love to hear your thoughts about it.

In closing, I pray for God's blessing on your pilgrimage, and mine; on your faith and mine; on your questioning and mine; and that in the midst of it all, we may have a deep sense of love and hope each day. Amen.