

Sermon for Christ Church Cathedral

Sunday 7 August 2016

Gen 15:1-6; Ps 33:12-22; Heb 11:1-3, 8-16; Lk 12:32-40

Today's Scripture readings have much to say about faith, especially Abraham's faith, so perhaps we might reflect together on what it means to be 'people of faith'. We do this as Christians who share with Jews and Muslims belief in one God and the status of children of Abraham, his descendants in faith, 'as many as the stars of heaven'.

In a few moments we will be invited to make our profession or affirmation of faith. The creed begins with words that are not quite as straightforward as they might seem: 'We believe'. The problem is that the word 'believe' has several different meanings for us today that would never have entered the heads of the people who first put it at the beginning of the creed. For example, you might be saying to yourself right now, 'I am not absolutely certain where this woman who is preaching today comes from, but I believe it might be New Zealand (I hope you aren't saying Australia!). In this case, believing means having a hunch, but also being a bit unsure about something. At other times we might say, 'Seeing is believing'. A tourist might remark, 'Now that I have seen for myself, I believe there really are forty shades of green in Ireland, although when I first heard that, I thought it was fanciful.' Sometimes we talk about believing as accepting the truth of a claim or an idea, so we say, 'Everyone is entitled to their own beliefs'. In Ireland, if you tell someone something and then add, 'So I believe,' there is a strong chance that it isn't true. All of these meanings are quite different from what believing means in the Scriptures and in the Creed.

In New Testament times—and in the early centuries of the Church when the creed was first written down—'believe' was still what we call a performative word. It was more about action, performance than about a state of mind. Believing meant committing oneself in very concrete, practical and even costly ways. The story we heard today about God's promise to Abraham of a son makes it clear that Abraham's faith involved doing something. This story is told twice more in Genesis. The re-tellings are much livelier than this rather patriarchal version that we heard this morning. Abraham actually falls down laughing at the idea of having a son at the age of one hundred (Gen 17:17). His wife Sarah is also highly amused and whispers to herself, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?' (Gen 18:10-15). In its lovely delicate way, the Bible makes it clear that 'trying for a baby' has not been on their 'to do list' for quite some time. Yet to do precisely this will be to demonstrate that performative faith in God that the Bible speaks of. That is why when Abraham believed God in this concrete and practical way, God counted his faith as a righteous deed. Similarly, as we heard in our reading from Hebrews, 'By faith Abraham . . . set out not knowing where he was going.' To venture out on God's instructions on a risky journey with no idea where it will bring you, that is to believe God, the adventure that the Scriptures call faith.

And this is the adventure that we are pledging ourselves to when we begin the Creed with our declaration of performative faith: 'We believe'. The creed has its ancient origin in the three questions put to people about to be baptised. 'Do you believe in God the Father? 'I do.' Do you believe in God's Son, Jesus? 'I do.' Do you believe in the Holy Spirit? 'I do.' That answer may well remind us of the traditional formula for marriage vows and that can teach us something about performative believing. When a man and a woman say 'I do' there is far more at issue than entering into the legal status of husband and wife. There has been a process of getting to know each other, growing in love and understanding and now they are promising that their whole life, love, mind and heart will be dedicated to each other and that they will work together at growing in mutual love and understanding. Saying 'I believe in God' is not unlike saying 'I do' to one's husband or wife. It means promising to make God our heart's desire, our treasure. It means learning and working to set our life on track in God's direction, as shown to us by Jesus. As he says to us in today's reading from Luke's gospel, 'Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.'

Most of us would have to admit that we find parts of the Nicene Creed a little obscure. This is because much of the wording was intended to settle questions that were burning issues in the fourth century, but hardly keep us awake at night! But we continue to use this particular form of the affirmation of faith as an expression of our continuity with earlier generations of believers (although the Book of Common Prayer in some other countries provides different forms of the Creed in more contemporary language inspired by the New Testament). The Nicene Creed can come across to us as a list or catalogue of things that we are required to believe, perhaps something like the 'Table of Contents' for a textbook on theology and that can reinforce the misapprehension that faith is all about what goes on in our heads. I find it helpful to think of the creed as a narrative. The creed tells a story. It distils the Scriptures from the beginning when God created the world, through the coming of Jesus and the formation of his Spirit-filled community, right up to the final words of the Bible that look forward to the complete establishment of God's kingdom. When we begin the Creed with 'We believe' we are declaring that we want to be actors in that story. And that is why we say a big Amen at the end of it. St Augustine taught that saying 'Amen' is like putting one's signature to a letter or contract (*Amen dicere subscribere est*). 'Signing up', as we would say today. So the creed is a symbolic way for Christians to express their identity as people who have signed up for the adventure of faith in God. The Eastern Church actually calls it the Symbol of Faith. To say the creed is to express our happiness that we are Christians, our gratitude to God who establishes, strengthens and settles us in the faith. To do this is an act of worship. So the Church's liturgy is the Creed's natural habitat. We affirm our faith in the one God in all respect for people of other faiths, and in special solidarity with our fellow members of the three Abrahamic faith traditions.

Performative faith that makes us actors in the story of God's loving plan for the world commits us to learning how God sees our world. The psalmist whose poetry we heard today imagines God gazing down attentively not only on all the people in the world, but on everything that lives in the Earth: the elements, the animals and the plants (Psalm 33:13-14). As the Source of all life who holds everything in being, God is the great Lover of Life,

continually investing infinite interest and care in our world. This is what Christians call ‘the reign of God’ or ‘the kingdom of God’. Performative believing in God means learning to share this God’s-eye-view so that we can participate in the kingdom, so that the Creator’s loving design for the world will become our vision too—even our passion, as it did for Jesus. It is obvious from all this that faith can never be a private affair of the individual person. Believing in God requires of us comprehensive engagement in questions of culture, politics, economics, ecology. ‘Believing in God’ is not an other-worldly preoccupation with ‘a heavenly country’ that allows us to be unconcerned with the country and the wider world in which we live. As the World Council of Churches has been insisting since the 1970s, faith in God opens us up, unavoidably, to the demands of justice, peace, and the integrity of all creation. In our fractured world, it can be difficult to see how God’s reign is making any headway. But it is to people like us, trying to live out our faith, that God reiterates today that consoling greeting to Abraham, ‘Do not be afraid. I am your shield’. It is to people just like us that Jesus reiterates what he said to his first disciples, ‘Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s pleasure to give you the kingdom.’

Let thy merciful kindness, O God, be upon us,

For we do put our trust in you (Psalm 33:22).

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