

Reflection for Pentecost 2 by Rev'd Peter Shaw

There is an idea around that faith is about taking a deep breath and believing something that isn't true.

Now, faith certainly has to do with believing what we cannot see. In fact, we all tend to do that most days and I don't think that there are many who don't.

I drove to church this morning. I didn't check that the battery was charged and the petrol tank full (yes, there have been times in the past when I have been caught on one of these counts). This morning I just turned the ignition key. The car started and I came. I had faith not just in the car I could see, but in things about it I could not see, faith in the competence of the excellent mechanic who maintains our car.

And there is something else important about faith. Faith isn't just believing something, it is acting on what we believe.

Faith isn't a leap into the dark. It isn't closing your eyes, taking a deep breath and hoping. But, even when we have faith in things we can see, we are trusting in qualities about them that we cannot see.

The writer to the Hebrews put it this way, "To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see... It is by faith that we understand that the universe was created by God's word, so that what can be seen was made out of what cannot be seen... No one can please God without faith, for whoever comes to God must have faith that God exists and rewards those who seek him" (Heb. 11.1,3,6). He goes on to talk about a whole series of Old Testament characters and the ways in which they lived out their trust in the unseen God and his promises – which were not fulfilled in their lifetime.

The Object of Faith

Jesus knew what was in people, what they were capable of and how fickle they could be. He knew that, in the final count, even his closest friends would betray, desert or deny him. And yet he had come to work with people, and would be committing to others the completion of his mission in this world. He himself had to live by faith in the Father and looked in people for a genuine response of faith in him and his rescuing work. And that was it! People needed to change and they could change. That was why he came into the world. He came "to seek and to save the lost" (Lk. 19.10). He "did not come to be served; he came to serve and to give his life to redeem many people" (Mk. 10.45). In today's reading he said that he had come to call "not the righteous but sinners".

From among these saved and redeemed people, Jesus needed a team who would carry forward his mission – themselves calling others to repentance, so that they too would be saved.

But Jesus was realistic about people. He knew that even his disciples who would form the nucleus of the church could not be depended on to follow his will without deviation. The secret was for them to put their trust in him and declare the good news that was available in him and not the other way around. Whenever the call has gone out to trust in the infallible church or that salvation would come only through the church, there has been trouble. Our final ultimate faith is not to be in redeemed humanity, but in the Redeemer himself.

The Call of Matthew

When Jesus began building his team, it is full of surprises. We would expect a group who had some status in society, certainly those whose lives had been marked by personal integrity and had no social marks against them.

We hear in our reading today that “As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he got up and followed him”.

A tax-collector? Now there’s a dangerous choice. Tax-collectors were despised – and with good reason. They were traitors – working for the Romans against the Jewish people. They were dishonest – using their position to gain more than they should.

And he got up and followed Jesus? That’s unlikely too! Giving up the security of a well-paid job – with all its perks – for the uncertainty of going along with this wandering preacher. Already we see the redeeming influence of Jesus on Matthew. He gathers his old friends to meet Jesus his new friend – “many tax collectors and other outcasts came and joined Jesus and his disciples at the table.”

The Pharisees couldn’t understand this. They were good enough, respectable people – or so they thought! But Jesus knew what was in them! They too needed to be changed, but they would not come. They would continue to trust in their own upbringing, their own status, their own goodness.

Your Faith has Made you Well

The second part of our reading is about two people who put their trust in Jesus for miracles of healing.

A Jewish official, identified by Mark and Luke as Jairus, came up to him. His daughter had just died, “but come and place your hands on her, and she will live.” This father had faith in Jesus. His daughter couldn’t exercise faith – she had died! But the father is convinced that Jesus can raise her to life.

Along the way, a woman who had suffered from severe bleeding for twelve years came up behind Jesus and touched the edge of his cloak. Mark writes that “at once Jesus knew that power had gone out of him” (Mk 5.30). Jesus turned to her and said, “Courage, my daughter! Your faith has made you well.” Her faith had made her well because her faith was in Jesus. “It does matter what you believe, as long as you believe it!”

Then Jesus entered the official’s house, sent the professional mourners outside and raised the dead girl.

The power to heal and to raise the dead was in Jesus as a gift from the heavenly Father – Jesus was living here as a man. For both Jairus and the unnamed woman faith was the key that opened the door, that made the impossible possible.

And, just as he called Matthew, Jesus still calls us to follow him. His call is for us. We do not come, any more than Matthew could, pleading all the reasons he should welcome us. We can only come because he loves us, and has already given his life for our sins. We can come with our disappointment, our failure, our sin, our humanness... We can trust him for forgiveness and walk into a whole new life.

AMEN