

**Call to Worship**

As we begin our worship these words are for our thinking this morning: ‘Let us lift up our eyes to the Lord enthroned in the heavens! We come ready to worship, to listen anew to the Word of the Lord. Have mercy upon us, O Lord, and may we never tempt your scorn. Fill us, as we gather, with your spirit of justice. Let your freedom reign, O Lord, guiding us and leading us to new life. We are here to worship God, let us lift our hearts in praise.

**Hymn CH4 162 – The God of Abraham praise,**

**Prayer of Adoration & Praise**

We clear our heads, we still our hearts and we come before God in prayer, let us pray.

Lord God, giver of all good things, giver of life itself, we worship and adore you. You created the earth and asked us to care for it.

We took control and began to exploit the resources you gave us. You gave us enough and more to share. We hoarded as though things were scarce and let others go hungry and voiceless.

God, if we have learned nothing else in this season, may we never forget how connected we all are across the world. When one part of the body hurts, all suffer.

So, God, before we lose sight of all that you’ve taught us, unclench our hands and release in us your generosity. Convict us in our worship of your call to us to clothe the naked, to feed the hungry, to house the homeless, to give sight to the blind and healing to the lame— such is your power and your faith in us. May our worship then renew and equip us to serve you by serving the world.

This we ask in Jesus’ name, who taught us when we pray together to say; Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive others that sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

## Reading: Hebrews 11: 1 – 16, 12: 1 – 2 (taken from The Good News Translation)

### Faith

**11** To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see. <sup>2</sup> It was by their faith that people of ancient times won God's approval.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> It was faith that made Abel offer to God a better sacrifice than Cain's. Through his faith he won God's approval as a righteous man, because God himself approved of his gifts. By means of his faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.

<sup>5</sup> It was faith that kept Enoch from dying. Instead, he was taken up to God, and nobody could find him, because God had taken him up. The scripture says that before Enoch was taken up, he had pleased God. <sup>6</sup> No one can please God without faith, for whoever comes to God must have faith that God exists and rewards those who seek him.

<sup>7</sup> It was faith that made Noah hear God's warnings about things in the future that he could not see. He obeyed God and built a boat in which he and his family were saved. As a result, the world was condemned, and Noah received from God the righteousness that comes by faith.

<sup>8</sup> It was faith that made Abraham obey when God called him to go out to a country which God had promised to give him. He left his own country without knowing where he was going. <sup>9</sup> By faith he lived as a foreigner in the country that God had promised him. He lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who received the same promise from God. <sup>10</sup> For Abraham was waiting for the city which God has designed and built, the city with permanent foundations.

<sup>11</sup> It was faith that made Abraham able to become a father, even though he was too old and Sarah herself could not have children. He<sup>[a]</sup> trusted God to keep his promise. <sup>12</sup> Though Abraham was practically dead, from this one man came as many descendants as there are stars in the sky, as many as the numberless grains of sand on the seashore.

<sup>13</sup> It was in faith that all these persons died. They did not receive the things God had promised, but from a long way off they saw them and welcomed them, and admitted openly that they were foreigners and refugees on earth. <sup>14</sup> Those who say such things make it clear that they are looking for a country of their own. <sup>15</sup> They did not keep thinking about the country they had left; if they had, they would have had the chance to return. <sup>16</sup> Instead, it was a better country they longed for, the heavenly country. And so, God is not ashamed for them to call him their God, because he has prepared a city for them.

## God Our Father

**12** As for us, we have this large crowd of witnesses around us. So then, let us rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way, and of the sin which holds on to us so tightly, and let us run with determination the race that lies before us. <sup>2</sup> Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end. He did not give up because of the cross! On the contrary, because of the joy that was waiting for him, he thought nothing of the disgrace of dying on the cross, and he is now seated at the right side of God's throne.

**Hymn CH4 97 – O God, you search me, and you know me.**

### Sermon – ‘Elements of Faith’

Today's reading from Hebrews it's a chapter full of people who responded to God's calling in the night with a bold, 'Here I am Lord – send me!' I first came across the Book of Hebrews when I was 14 years' old, at the Boys' Brigade Bible Class. Captain Phillips took a couple of months to explain this letter to us, chapter by chapter, and this passage was one which stood out for me. Something appealed to me about the poetry of this passage – the repeated rhythms of '*It was faith, it was faith, it was faith,*' and all the Bible stories I knew seemingly wrapped into one.

In today's passage, we get we get a cut. We start out with perhaps the most famous verse about faith in the Bible. We start with the writer's definition: '*To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see.*' Then the author continues, describing the faith of the ancestors. Here we read of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, instantly memorable names. Yet, the writer also lists Abel, Noah, Enoch, David, Gideon, Samson and others. This is a litany of faith, of those who responded to God's call by faith.

This leads me to wonder, what do **we** do by faith? How do we hear and respond to God's call faithfully? I think we do things 'by faith' every day. Beyond trusting that it is the wind that we cannot see that makes the breeze, I think it takes an amazing amount of faith just to live in this world. In my mind, I see driving a car, and the amount of faith it takes to trust that hundreds, maybe thousands of cars that we pass will all stay in the correct lane. We must have faith in all those other drivers. We usually do not even give it much thought, and yet we are putting our faith in other human beings whom we have never even met. I am sure we all perform similar acts of faith in the everyday things of our lives.

However, when it comes to having faith in God, we often find ourselves challenged. We are overwhelmed. We are full of doubts. We feel like we are not up to what God asks of us. We are not sure that God is really calling 'us', and we are definitely not sure how to respond to that call. If we can have faith in each other, most of the time, why is having faith in God – so hard? Why is believing that God calls 'us' – so hard? I am beginning to think that part of the problem is that we make faith, God's call, answering God's call, such a special, unique thing in our minds. It is the same kind of problem that most of us have with prayer.

How often, over the last four years or so, have we spoken about prayer on a Sunday morning. How often have we said that prayer is just talking? Prayer is talking with God. Yet, we call this talking – 'prayer' and when we give that name to our chat with God it seems to add a huge amount of pressure to be perfect and eloquent. Then the anxiety creeps in and we are suddenly a 'mess' when we talk to God. That's also before we remember the Minister's (incredible) all-age talk on the five fingers of prayer and debate how strong or weak our fourth finger is.

Which leads me to wonder if the same uncertainty strikes when we must talk about our faith and answering God's call. We have faith in a variety of things all the time and we are constantly looking for advice, direction and meaning. Yet, when God enters our lives, placing His faith in us and seeking our faith in Him in return, when God tries to give our lives direction – the anxiety creeps in and we are suddenly a 'mess'.

So, why is having faith in God so hard? I think maybe we equate 'having faith in God' with the belief that God will ensure everything goes smoothly in our lives. If we only have faith, we will be protected from harm. From evil. From disaster. From pain. From loss. We set ourselves up to believe that our faith in God is actually – faith in God as some sort of 'guardian angel' or something similar. However, we limit ourselves and our faith, and we certainly limit God with that view of faith.

For better or for worse, faith in God does not guarantee us some shield of protection – at least not the kind that prevents bad things from happening in our lives. I have seen so many people come to struggle and doubt their faith because of the death of a loved one, because of loss or hardships suffered. Seeing these events as a 'sign' that God is not 'really' there. God does not really care. Signs that faith in God is not warranted. Yet, if we are trying to have faith in God as a 'guardian angel', our faith **will** disappoint us!

Why? Because our Biblical witness calls out to us that this is not what faith is, or what faith has been throughout the ages. Jesus tries to warn us, throughout His teaching,

that our faith in God will likely cause us suffering, persecution and bad intentions from those around us – our faith in God is no promise of a contented life, at least by society's standards. Indeed, if you read today's passage from Hebrews, and the rest of the chapter, that we didn't read this morning, you will see a litany of people who had faith in God but who did not, exactly, have the most peaceful lives as a result.

Abel is mentioned as a man of faith, and Abel was murdered by his own brother because of his faith and his brother's lack of faith. Moses' faith led him to leading the people from Egypt, yet Moses never made it to the Promised Land that God described. The writer goes on to mention the countless others who, in faith, were tortured, flogged, imprisoned, or killed throughout Christian history. On top of that, we read: *'It was in faith that all these persons died. They did not receive the things God had promised, but from a long way off they saw them...'* This is what your faith might bring you!

Now, before we become discouraged and think that, maybe, we do not want to have faith, we must ask ourselves a question: what is our faith all about? Our faith is in God – not God's magical powers to bless us – but in God and God's never-ending, unfailing, love for us. It is our faith in God, our knowledge that God loves us, that gives us strength, even when we have made mistakes, have sinned, have caused pain and hurt to our friends, families or neighbours.

It is our faith that supports us, even when our lives are filled with loss or stress or worry or hardships. Our faith is in our God. That God is always with us. Always loving us. No matter what. It is hard to find that love anywhere else. It is faith like this that allows us to take life-changing risks like those that people of faith recorded in the Book of Hebrews took. They risked home, family, status, possessions, security, shelter, even their very lives to follow God's call. Why? Because in their faith they knew that God loved them and would go with them.

When you think about it, following God's is actually simple. We need direction and God offers one. God says, 'Here I am. Where are you?' And we respond: 'Here we are, God.' We follow, we answer, not because we are guaranteed success in every detail, but, because our faith prompts us to share the love of God that we have experienced with other people. That love is expressed again today as we participate in the Sacrament of Holy Communion together.

However, if we insist that our faith in God guarantees our protection, guarantees things go a certain way for us – our faith will not take us very far. Yet, if we realise that

our faith in God provides us with what we really need: the knowledge of God's loving presence – well – then there is no limit to where God will take us.

Can you do that? Can you place your faith, completely in God? No matter what. Will you answer His call? If you can do these things, then the well-known words of hymn writer, Daniel Schutte, may just well ring in our hearts: *'Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go, Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart.'*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### **Hymn CH4 251 – I, the Lord of sea and sky,**

#### **Prayer for Ourselves and Others**

We unite our hearts again in prayer, let us pray.

God you have reminded us that all humanity is connected. We are dependent on one another and on the earth that you created.

So, help us to live in love, caring for one another, building up one another in love and reverence.

May we never avert our eyes when any of your children suffers but instead hear you calling us to make a difference.

May we never feel self-sufficient but always be aware of how we need each other.

May we never be silent when our voices should be raised in protest.

God it is not your will that any should suffer, so help us to pray for and work towards justice, inclusion, equity and love with all that we have, bearing one another's burdens, sharing one another's sorrows.

God, help us to use our power wisely and always for good until we see your kingdom come and your will done. Amen.

#### **The Sacrament of Holy Communion<sup>i</sup>**

##### **Invitation**

This is the table of our Lord Jesus Christ who calls you to dine with him in this place today. Calling you, he invites you to find, at this table, strength to carry your cross.

So, come all who are hesitant and dithering. Come you who are sure and committed. Choose Christ who has chosen you. Choose life, symbolised here in bread and wine.

### **Narrative**

Jesus constantly laid before his friends, choices: The choice to remain or to follow. The choice to listen or to ignore. The choice to be blind or to see. The choice to be sick or to be whole. The choice of life or of death.

His disciples chose life - they followed, they listened, they saw, they were made whole. And even though they often faltered or dithered or forgot, Jesus didn't give up or let up - he kept on holding out forgiveness and newness of life.

And so, the night before he died, he gathered his friends around a meal, spoke to them again of the cross and invited them to remember him by choosing to share in this feast together.

He shared bread, symbol of his body, broken for the life of the world. He shared the cup, symbol of a new relationship with God. This table bears those symbols today.

Before we share, let us give thanks.

### **Prayer of Thanksgiving**

God, we thank you that you never impose yourself on us but gently, persistently invite us into relationship with you.

You invite us to choose life over death, to take up our cross and follow Christ.

May we choose life for the sake of the world.

God, we pray for our world in all its pain and suffering.

We pray for all those who, every day, are forced to make hard choices or for whom there is no choice.

Those forced from home and family by war, by oppression, by danger, by evil or natural disaster.

Show us how to restore the voices of those who are silenced along with the freedom to choose for those who find themselves between a rock and a hard place.

May your cross symbolise the way of suffering carved out in love that transforms pain and renews life. May we always be willing to bear another's burden, to lift up the suffering and to know the blessing of travelling together.

We pray for refugees, for migrants, for all seeking a place to call home. May we choose to open our hearts to make room, to share the road and to know ourselves taught by those whose learning is wrought through pain and hardship.

May we choose life for the sake of the church.

God, we thank you for all those who have gone before us on the journey of faith. Those on whose shoulders we now stand. Those who surround us as we share this feast. May

we always make space for others around your table, where there is love enough for all.

Give your church boldness and wisdom to proclaim the God who invites all people to choose life.

May we choose life for our sake and the sake of the communities in which we live.

As we go about our everyday lives give us courage to serve and to be served.

Be with those whom we know who grieve, who have lost the joy of living. Help us to put ourselves aside and sit with them until we are ready to continue the journey together with you.

So, choosing God, as we come to this table today, may our choice witness to the hope we have in you. Send you Holy Spirit on these gifts of bread and of wine that they may become life for all.

Feed us here with strength to take up our cross and follow you every day.

Amen.

### **Fraction**

#### **(Taking bread)**

This is Christ's body broken for the life of the world. We eat together as we remember.

#### **(Taking the cup)**

This cup symbolises Christ's shed blood reminding us of forgiveness and newness of life. We drink together as we remember

### **Prayer after communion**

God who has fed us and confronted us again with our oneness with all the world, strengthen us to take up our cross and follow you, gathering up along the way all those who falter and fall, all those who dither, those who are blind or sick and want to be whole. We who have choices, every day may we choose life with you, life in all its fullness for the sake of the world and the kingdom of God.

Amen

### **Hymn CH4 167 – Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,**

### **Benediction**

Our faith asks much of us, sometimes it can feel too much. As you go from our time together know that you are enough. Your presence and faithfulness are a great witness to God's love. So, as you leave to live, love and serve, may blessing of God, Father, Son & Spirit be upon you and all whom you love this day and forevermore. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Written by the Rev. Liz Crumlish <http://tableliturgy.blogspot.com/>