

Pentecost 2 2024 All Souls **The Heart of Faith** dtw

Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening" (1 Sam 3.10)

The Psalmist ponders, "O Lord, you have searched me out and known me...you discern my path and the places where I rest...in your book were all my members written...how deep are your thoughts to me O God.." (Ps 139. 1,2,15,17) Young Samuel, no doubt, would end up agreeing with that!

Our Christian tradition has roots, deep roots, roots that go right back to the great stories, the old, old stories of faith, and today we are given to focus particularly on the story of Samuel, his call and his faith. It is a beautiful, poignant story, which I'm sure, many of us can relate to in one level or other as we reflect upon our own childhoods' imaginations and promptings, and perhaps our own early awakenings to faith.

But what is Faith? Has the *old, old story* been handballed with a similar force to you and me in our own spiritual wanderings? It was Charles Kingsley who said, "I do not want merely to possess a faith, I want a *faith that possesses me*". Could we say that?

Most of us grew up, particularly people of my generation or even younger, and certainly older, learning about *the* faith at Sunday School and in confirmation groups, hearing the stories of Bible heroes and events, learning the Creed, 10 commandments and Lord's Prayer. We learned about sacraments and some even had to learn the catechism off by heart and recite it in front of the rector before we graduated! And as we grew up alongside the sharing of these doctrines and stories and practises, we were meant to have *our own* stories to tell - how the faith impinged on our lives, the ways in which God had impacted the betrothal of Divine Grace upon us – God's presence within *us*.

This second aspect of faith is so important – my faith. *MY FAITH*. Rather than *the* faith. I am convinced that today, more than ever before, in the life of our church, Christians need to come out and share their stories, their journeys of faith – quite simply, in their own language, but yes, ever so authentically. That's what our Archbishop is encouraging: the experience of discipleship and its rippling effect. I don't know what your experience has been when listening to another's spiritual journey – but things inside you resound and trigger and well up and one cannot walk away quite the same person that one was before. And you never know: the person who is listening may just be saying in their heart, 'I want what she's having!' And of course it's a *New, Now Story*.

We're all novices in the journey of faith. Samuel was a novice. And before him, the Patriarch Abraham was a novice; remember, he went to a place he knew not and to a people he knew not – there are many unknowns in the journey of faith – it wouldn't be faith if it were not so. But, because he believed and journeyed on in faith, he received what he saw in his faith vision, for he 'looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.' He was asked by Yahweh-God to cast his eyes to the north and to the south, to the east and to the west and from his loins descendants were born 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore' the scripture says. People sometimes use the expression, "what you see is what you get" when speaking perhaps about a person's character or the authenticity of a product. I think it is a great vision-statement too. What do you see for your life? – your family? – this church? – by faith, with thanksgiving? Is your faith-glass, as it were, half empty or half full, to be filled to overflowing by the Well of Life?

You see, we bring our faith into an encounter with a mysterious God, a God who will not be pinned down in fact, into neat catechisms or formulae. Time and time again in the Scriptures, it is the *otherness* of God, the awesomeness of God, that is the instrument for the conversion of the human soul. This is the God who says, 'My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways...as the heavens are

higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts'. (Isa 55. 8-9).

We can never encompass God in thoughts or words. When we talk about the Divine we only have a human point of view – that's all we've got, isn't it? – the eternal from the standpoint of the temporal - the infinite in finite terms – the absolute from the severely limited perspective of the relative. Rudolph Otto describes the sacred as, *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* : the awe-inspiring mystery which fascinates us. We may be so humbled as to hide from the fearful majesty of God rather as our ancestors did in Eden. But also to gaze in wonder at divine loveliness.

Perhaps one day you may like to stand at the seaside or find a spot up a hill and gaze at a sunset. And as you stand there – you could open your arms and say, "Holy, holy, holy Lord. God of power and might. Heaven and earth are full of your glory". Why save it just for church? Mystery pervades the whole of reality. Indeed, true knowledge and freedom are not possible without the experience of mystery. In the languages of literature, art, drama, music, we touch the hem of God's garment and feel a little tingle of the divine; but God will always remain incomprehensible.

There are things, of course, about which we may be certain within the content of faith, but faith can never be confined to certainty. Its core is the mystery and the reality of the Eternal coming into our Time. As Wesley put it, 'Our God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man' or the eternal Christ who comes again to us this morning so humbly and so simply in bread and wine. FW Faber's hymn puts it,

*There's a wideness in God's mercy
like the wideness of the sea
There's a kindness in his justice
which is more than liberty.
For the love of God is broader
than the measure of our mind,
and the heart of the eternal
is most wonderfully kind.
But we make his love too narrow
by false limits of our own
and we magnify his strictness
with a zeal he will not own.*

The essence of Christianity is not dogmatic systems of belief, but being apprehended by the living Christ, being touched by amazing grace. True faith holds on to Christ and for all else is uncommitted. The true God does not give us an immutable belief system. The true God gives us Divine Encounter! A Burning Bush! As Paul says, 'for it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Cor 4. 6). And when we talk about faith, it is so that others might see that Face.