

Evangelical Alliance Week of Prayer 2009

Theme: By faith...

Bible text for the whole week: Hebrews 11

Sunday, 11.01.2009

...gaining understanding

Bible text

Hebrews 11, 1-3: Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

Complementary text

1. Corinthians 2, 10-16

Thought for the day

Sometimes we 'believe' something, because we do not know better, or because the illusion that it creates helps us (Karl Marx: "The opium of the people"), or because it is easier to grasp at straws than to grasp at nothing at all.

But the people of the Bible experienced their faith as a certainty that they did not need to produce for themselves - their faith was a conviction, granted to them by God. They had no other proofs for their faith, and did not need any. They did not dispute the greater likelihood of evolution or Intelligent Design - they experienced God's testimony for themselves, quite personally (1 John 5, 9-11). God was not just the 'Object' of their faith but rather, God met with them as the "author and perfecter of their faith" (Heb. 12, 2). They experienced Him as the one who awakened and sustained faith in their lives. It was 'obvious' to them that they believed in Him: or, more precisely (and more personally), that they believed Him.

So the New Testament expects not only that God reveal Himself to us in creation, and in us through our consciences (Romans 1,19-21), but also that in our encounter with Jesus Christ, we will be so overwhelmed by His love that faith and trust in Him will be awakened in us (John 1,9-12 among others). This God-given relationship with Himself provides a whole new perspective on everything. We recognise the world and existence itself as a gift from Him that leads back to Him. Fellowship with God sets us free from slavery to material things, on the one hand, and sets us free, on the other hand, to 'use' the world as His creation, stewarding it for His glory (Genesis 2,15).

Worship and thanks

Worship the Father in heaven, as Creator, Giver of gifts, and responsibilities
Worship the LORD Jesus Christ as the author and perfecter of our faith

Intercession

Acceptance of the gifts of faith, assurance of salvation, and preservation of faith
Theological teaching and education
Responsible management of the creation

Monday, 12.01.2009

....can we please God?

Bible text

Hebrews 11, 4-6: By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it being dead still speaks. 5: By faith Enoch was translated so that he did not see death, "*and was not found because God has translated him*", for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God. 6: But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Complementary text

Romans 3, 21-28

Thought for the day

As we read the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4, we wonder why God accepted Abel's offering and rejected that of his brother Cain. (Perhaps the link can be made between his animal sacrifice and animal skins, which God gave sinful people for clothing to be able to stand before God – something that the self-produced fig leaf covering was not able to do: see Genesis 3, 7&21. Abel thereby grasping a divine "Tradition", while Cain tried to make his own way to God ...)

Whatever the sacrifices may have meant in their day, the book of Hebrew's explanation goes deeper still. It points to Abel's attitude: "by faith". In other words, even the 'right' sacrifice falls short of the target if the heart is distant (Isaiah 1, 11-17). We cannot impress God by what we do – but we can open our hearts to Him, and enter into a trusting relationship with Him. By doing that, Abel – long before Abraham (see Genesis 15, 6) – was recognised as 'righteous' and Enoch is said to, have pleased God. If we, like Enoch, want to know how we can 'live with God' (see Genesis 5, 21-24), then we can clearly only do so 'by faith', by our 'entrusting ourselves to Him'. The Greek translation of the Enoch story (the Septuagint) understood it as 'pleasing God'. His faith, his trust pleased God so much that He, so to speak, took Enoch 'directly' to Himself (and we may also enjoy this same hope of heavenly glory. See 1 Thessalonians 4, 13-18).

In our encounter with Jesus, we see something similar. Long before Paul explains the significance of faith as the foundation of an individual's life with God, the Lord Himself again and again recognises and praises the faith of those who come to Him (Matthew 8,10-11) and He is troubled about little faith and unbelief in His environment (Matthew 8, 26 with His disciples; Matthew 13, 58 with those distant from Him).

Worship and thanksgiving

The gift of righteousness, through faith

Intercession

The protection of our own faith; watching our own lives; faith should visibly shape our lives

The unity of Christians

Prayer movements

Tuesday, 13.01.2009

...living courageously

Bible text

Hebrew 11, 7-8: By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith. 8: By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would *afterward* receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.

(See also Hebrews 11, 29 und 32).

Complementary text

Luke 5, 1-8

Thought for the day

At last we have reached the 'heroes of the faith': Noah builds a huge ship on dry ground, Abraham sets off for an unknown country ... the disciples' plea comes to mind: 'Lord increase/strengthen (literally 'add to') our faith!' Jesus' answer seems so idealistic, measured against our daily experience: even 'a mustard seed' of faith is enough to throw a mountain or a mulberry tree into the sea (Luke 17, 5-6).

But before we resign ourselves to thinking that we are hopelessly lacking in faith, we should look more carefully at the context of both these Old Testament stories and Jesus' answer. Noah's and Abraham's faith 'achievement' was not that they roused themselves to great things: 'exerting themselves to do great things, by faith' so to speak. Actually, they did nothing at first: they simply lived for the time being, until (and this is the critical thing) God spoke to them quite personally, challenging them to do that which made them 'famous'. Now, of course, it gets interesting for their faith: how will they react? Do they dismiss God's speaking as sheer fantasy thereby staying 'sensibly' in their daily routine? Or do they risk converting God's orders into deeds? Insofar as they did that, they would become shining examples of faith: a faith that is able to hear the voice of God and obey. So they were not 'better at believing': they were simply those whom God could entrust with a particular task.

What does that mean for us? We do have to force ourselves to 'believe great things'. We should instead listen to and for God, so that He can entrust really personal tasks to us (see the parable that Jesus tells in the context of the plea for faith, in Luke 17, 7-10: the servant, who was commanded to plough and look after the sheep). Let's translate that into trusting obedience in our lives - be it into something 'Great' or something 'Small' (compare Philippians 2, 13-14). And should we then find ourselves 'unoccupied', then maybe Isaiah's request might lead to some action: 'Here I am. Send me!' (Isaiah 6, 8).

Worship and thanksgiving

God's plan for the salvation of people
God writes history **with** us

Intercession

Listening to God in the stillness; determination; courage; self-denial; willingness; commitment; obedience...

That God would be able to write history with each of us

Revival

Evangelistic activities like "ProChrist"

Wednesday 14.01.2009

...the impossible will be possible

Bible text

Hebrews 11, 11-12: By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. 12: Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude – innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.

Complementary text

John 20, 24-29

Thought for the day

Anybody still moved by yesterday's thoughts will be thankful for this text. What happens to us when God steps into our lives and occasionally blesses us in 'unbelievable ways'? In the story recorded in Genesis 18, 10-15, Sarah hardly laughed in cheerful expectation of a long-awaited child but rather with a strange mixture of surprise, lack of understanding, and helplessness in the light of the really unusual: that a 90 year old, should become a mother, through a 100 year old husband. It is clear that even the greatest role-models of faith were not some kind of spiritual robots that reacted like machines when God spoke to them. God granted that they remained flesh and blood people, allowed to express their questions, their doubts, and their reservations when they were confronted with His will. When God's ways are higher than our ways (Isaiah 55, 8-9), that is not only positive for us, but also tainted with the difficulty that they do not easily fit our life experience. In fact, His ways often change the plans we have and introduce something fascinatingly new. In those situations, the old wine (the familiar) can be preferable to the new (see Luke 5, 39).

When everything is happily fulfilled, in the end, everybody rejoices about what God has done: but at the beginning we 'laugh' like Sarah, or stand back, in unbelief, like Thomas (John 20, 24-25). But God is obviously patient with us and chooses to 'persuade' us (compare Jeremiah 20, 7). So we do not need to be embarrassed that we 'laughed', we do not need to pretend that we have immediately understood everything and put it all into practice. Sarah was specifically reminded of her laughter (Genesis 18, 15), not to 'show her up', but rather to help her to break through from her initial incomprehension to joy. This way, every time she called her son later, she was reminded just by his name, that God can lead us from unbelief to faith. Then she will have been able to cheerfully laugh about herself. Have we similarly learnt to laugh about our own reactions?

Worship and thanksgiving

A thankful look backwards

God does not reject doubters

Our powerlessness does not wreck God's plans

We praise God's goodness and thank Him for all He does

Intercession

That God would lead us from doubting to astonishment

That we would deal mercifully with others, and understand them better

Trouble spots of the world

Thursday 15.01.2009

...reaching our limits

Bible text

Hebrews 11, 17-19: By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, 18: of whom it was said, "*In Isaac your seed shall be called,*" 19: accounting that God was able to raise *him* up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.

Complementary text

Hebrews 11, 35-40

Thought for the day

So far we have got to know faith as the means of entering into relationship with God and as the God-given co-working in God's plans. Those things might just mean that a life of faith was sheer blessing: believers, simply put, would be 'advantaged' by their faith. In today's text we encounter Abraham just as he is led by God to give up his very life. To sacrifice his own son: how could God expect that?! By way of comfort, it must be said that the God of the Bible would never dream of such an inhuman thing: in contrast to pagan practices against which God continually and vehemently protested, (compare Jeremiah 7, 30-31 etc.) So why this 'temptation'?

That which seems incomprehensible today must be read in the light of the times, in which many people sacrificed everything to idols. Here is a sign that commitment to the True God, who is the God of Love does not lead to death but to life! The eyes of all those around Abraham should thereby have been opened, in their own drastic language, to the true character of God, who wants life not death. And the world was presented, according to the Book of Hebrews, with a sign of the coming resurrection that would one day come through Jesus Christ.

With this Hope, there are no dark valleys left, no hopeless situations: 'God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it' (1 Corinthians 10, 13). By means of this Hope, which according to Hebrews 11, 13-16 is a Hope of the eternal glory of God many were able (according to verses 35-38) to withstand even persecution - in the certainty that faithful and trusting dedication to the True God does not mean the loss of life (the life of 'advantages'), but rather it means finding true life: eternal life in God's glory and love.

Worship and thanksgiving

God fulfils His promises

God demands a lot of us, but never expects too much of us

God is for life

Intercession

Faithfulness; commitment; obedience...

For people undergoing hard trials

For persecuted Christians

Friday, 16.01.2009

....passing the blessing on

Bible text

Hebrews 11, 20-23: By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come. 21: By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshipped *leaning* on the top of his staff. 22: By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones. 23: By faith, Moses, when he was born, was hidden three months by his parents, because they saw *he was* a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king's command.

Complementary text

Psalm 78, 1-8

Thought for the day

Yesterday we spoke about the hope of faith and eternal life. That has to be **the** true source of hope. So, in contrast to a widely held view, biblical hope is not 'world-avoiding'. Rather, biblical hope delivers people from fear of death (compare Hebrews 2, 14-15) to a completely new existence in the here and now. As paradoxical as it may sound, it is precisely an assurance about eternal life that make it possible to shape this life and fill it with hope - even far beyond our own generation: 'Those who fear the Lord have a secure fortress, and for their children it will become a refuge' (Proverbs 14, 26).

That was clearly the Patriarch's certainty, which should inspire us too. So we Christians should not complain about the 'ever-deteriorating times' (historically, to do so is also foolish, because many things in life have improved, and continue to do so). Don't we realise that grumbling darkens our children's horizons? Our faith role-models were under no illusions: they did not expect the future life possibilities to come from the 'progress' of their society: rather they looked to God who gave their lives shape and content. This God will be the same in their children's day!

So we should desire to develop and foster a culture of blessing, by faith. We want to pray believingly for our children and the following generations. We want to encourage them to trust 'our' God: the God who can bless them and make level their life's path - even more than He has graciously done for ours.

Worship and thanks

We praise God for His faithfulness, reliability, changelessness
God is near at every stage of history
God blesses every generation
God grants security

Intercession

For the next generation: children, youth
For godly role-models: mothers and fathers in the faith
For courage to live and testify to the faith
For a culture of blessing

Saturday, 17.01.2009

....living consistently

Bible text

Hebrews 11, 24-28: By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, 25: choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, 26: esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward. 27: By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible. 28: By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, lest he who destroyed the firstborn should touch them.

Complementary text

Romans 12, 1-2

Thought for the day

Yesterday we thought about the faith and blessing of parents working out in children's lives. Today's text is a classic example of this blessing working out in practice. We read of a man who was separated from his own parent's home at a very early age, and grew up in a foreign environment. Does such a person lose his sense of direction? No, not at all! Rather, he recognises the sharp contrast between the external luxurious comfort of his pagan environment and the spiritual power of his background.

You might think that a person who, by chance, has become part of a Royal Family might seize every opportunity that presents. But actually, this very man (of whose 'luck' so many are jealous) understands the hollowness of all the gloss and glamour. He does not find life there. Instead, he finds true life in his people's calling: a people called to fellowship with God, since Abraham's day. To belong to this people, to share in the promises received by them becomes his reason for living and that which drives his whole career: a route that leads to being cursed, then stepping down socially and economically, and then to sharing in suffering and oppression: until, by God's will, it finally can lead to freedom.

Moses did not allow himself to be lured by the possibilities in the foreground of his life. Instead, he found his way back to his roots. And because of that, a life became possible that was moulded by the presence of God. Reverence for God set him free from fear of people and dependence on people whose favour does not bring life. He found his real home: those roots from which true life-power flows.

Worship and thanksgiving

God's plans and omnipotence

God's love for the Jewish people

Thank God for the roots in which we may build our faith

Intercession

Wisdom; discernment and ability to decide well; courage; faith; holiness; calling...

Loss of orientation, ethical confusion...

Sunday, 18.01.2009

....looking to the future

Bible text

Hebrews 11, 30-31: By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they were encircled for seven days. 31: By faith the harlot Rahab did not perish with those who did not believe, when she had received the spies with peace.

Complementary text

Hebrews 12, 1-3

Thought for the day

The conquest of Jericho by Joshua is not a simple theme. Does God take sides? Must one party fall, so that others receive a country? Looking at Genesis 15,16 opens up a deeper perspective (in Abraham's day, the sin of the Amorites had not yet 'reached its full measure': but in Joshua's day, it has). The judgement of God on the Canaanites, comparable to the fall of Sodom, proves to be the judgement of God on a world ripe for judgement. But God does not want sinners to die, but rather that sinners repent and live (Isaiah 18, 31-32). Rahab's example shows that even in the place where God's judgement is flooding in, there is still a possibility to repent and be saved. Jesus once said that prostitutes are more likely to enter the Kingdom of God than the self-righteous (Matthew 21, 31-32). That's the way it is here. Rahab clearly senses that the arrival of the Israelites is the judgement of God on her decadent city: and she acts accordingly. The other inhabitants of Jericho are therefore described as 'disobedient'. An indication that they had not understood the signs of the times for their own salvation. We might stumble over Rahab's 'white lie' (Joshua 2, 4-6): but her clear profession of God's way earned her an honorary place in the Book of Hebrews among the 'Heroes of Faith'.

Anybody who thinks this Old Testament text seems to contradict the love of God should read John 3, 36: 'Those who believe in the Son have eternal life, but those who reject the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them'. In the New Testament too, the judgement of God is the striking background to the love of God: that love that though Jesus Christ can protect us from precisely that wrath and judgement (compare Romans 5, 8-10). Rahab's story, in its historical context, is an example of eternal realities to those of us in Christ. We should also courageously leave all the unrighteousness and sin of this world and find salvation in Jesus Christ.

Worship and thanksgiving

God's holiness, righteousness, love and mercy

Intercession

Renunciation of unrighteousness and sin and a return to God; holiness; clear profession of faith; Standing up for truth and for God's plan
Environment; globalisation; fears for the future; 'tax collectors and sinners'

New King James Version of the Bible used for Bible versus