

Faith That Starts Fires

A sermon on Hebrews 11:29 - 12:2 and Luke 12:49-56 by Nathan Nettleton, 18 August 2019
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Message

Lived faith is the way to life in God, but it passes through a baptism of fire.

Sermon

From time to time you hear news of Christians being arrested for being Christians. They are arrested and detained because they are practicing their Christian faith. Now immediately when I say that, you know that I am talking about some other place overseas, don't you? I was in church in Cuba a few weeks ago, and the Christians there have experienced persecution in the not too distant past.

In a number of countries, the practice of Christian faith is considered to be a dangerous behaviour that threatens to destabilise the society. But it is generally not seen that way in Australia. In fact church attendance is still reasonably common among those who control the laws and finances of this country. If you had poked your head in the door at any of the big three churches on the Toorak hill this morning, you'd have been a lot more likely to notice senior bureaucrats and bankers than subversives and agitators.

In our society, Christianity is seen as safe and conservative and acceptable. And I wonder whether that is a major factor in why it also appears to be dying out? Because although there is clearly a growing hunger in our society for genuine spiritual transformation, people quite reasonably assume that Christianity is far too associated with the way we've always done things to be offering anything with any power to change lives.

Now it is an unavoidable fact that the general perceptions of what Christianity is have been formed by what church-going people are seen to be and do. And if we are perceived as being people who live comfortably with the status quo values of our society, then I would suggest that we are a long way from the kind of Christianity envisaged in the readings we heard just now from Luke's gospel and the letter to the Hebrews.

In the gospel reading, Jesus suggested that the impact of what he was on about would be like taking to the earth with a flame-thrower, and that it would be seriously divisive – it would even split families as people found themselves taking opposing sides over fundamental issues of how to live. And in the letter to the Hebrews, the exercise of faith is depicted as something over which kingdoms rise and fall and people are hounded out of towns and mercilessly persecuted.

It seems to me that one of the reasons we have rendered Christianity safe and innocuous is that there has been a major change in the way we think about what faith is. We often think and talk about it as being something you have: “Do you have faith?” “She's got a lot of faith.” “You need to have a little faith.” “Do I have enough faith?”

Those sorts of statements make faith sound like a possession, like something you own. And there are lots of things that our society has decided it can tolerate people possessing. Perhaps we've begun to think of faith as being a bit like marijuana – the possession of small amounts for private use will no longer get you into trouble; just don't start trafficking it. Somehow I

don't think either Jesus or the writer to the Hebrews was thinking of faith as something you simply possess for private consumption while keeping your head down and letting the rest of the world go about its business.

Faith is not a thing that can be possessed. It is something you do, or something you exercise. It is something active that affects those around. Perhaps we could compare it to power: there is no such thing as simply possessing power without ever exercising it and without anyone else being affected by it. Power only exists in the exercising of it; in putting it into practice.

So too with faith. Faith only exists as it is exercised and as it shapes what you do. That's why I think it is a mistake to completely equate faith with belief. You can have a belief that has no consequences. I can believe that Noah's ark was 450 feet long, but it won't make any difference to how I live when I wake up tomorrow morning.

Faith is more like trust; it is belief that steps out and commits itself to action. If we say that we trust that God's foolishness will prove wiser than the wisdom of the world, we are exercising an active choice and backing one side over the other. We are committing ourselves to living by one and rejecting the other. And once we start to do that, the sparks begin to fly and the fires begin to break out.

If we say that we are willing to trust God's radical hospitality over the world's self-protective closed border policies, we may be taking real risks. If it means we reject the wisdom of the world that says that this country should keep out those seeking asylum from elsewhere, and instead trust that those who offer a place of welcome and refuge will be vindicated by God, we will not only find ourselves on the unpopular side of the opinion polls, but we may find ourselves breaking the law and facing arrest and public vilification.

But that's what faith is. To say that we believe that something should be done but that we're not willing to do it unless it is popular or at least legal is not the exercise of faith. It is the exercise of compliance. Jesus was in no doubt that his own radical faith in God was going to plunge him into a baptism of fire. And he was also quite clear about the stress and anxiety that he was going to have to endure as he approached it. And he was under no illusions that the whole-hearted living of the life of faith would make the world a nicer and more peaceful place. "My presence will not bring peace," he said, "but will cause people to take sides, one against the other. It will split families and divide friends."

Now all that might sound decidedly uninviting. "Where is the good news?", you might reasonably ask. Well, both readings point to the answer. Jesus speaks of a baptism of fire, but a baptism is not only something you are plunged into. It is also something from which you emerge with a new identity and a new life filled with God's Holy Spirit. The baptism of fire is the birth place of new life.

Similarly, the opening image of faith in tonight's reading from Hebrews was of God's people exercising faith by passing through the Red Sea to freedom. The trauma of being trapped between an army and an uncrossable body of water was not what life was all about, but it was a situation in which the only easy way out was a compliant return to slavery, and the way to freedom and life would only open to those who made a massive investment of risk-defying faith.

So the good news is that we are not called to face the fire for no reason, or to take risks of faith just for the hell of it. Rather we are called to face the fire simply because that's what lies between us and the realisation of God's purposes on earth and there is no way around.

And as the writer to the Hebrews says, if we keep our eyes on Jesus and follow his lead, the vision of the freedom, love and joy to come will give us the perseverance to push on through whatever threatens to engulf us, because that vision of a world where love and justice finally reign and all things are made one in God is the promise of the only life that is ultimately worth living and the only life worth dying for.