19th November 2017

Reformation 500: Faith

Romans 3.21-26

We continue our celebration of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation by considering the topic of faith. Martin Luther rediscovered the centrality of grace in the gospel message: God’s unconditional, undeserved love and mercy towards us. As Paul in his letter to the Romans writes: *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith.*

*This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. Romans 3.23-25,22*

Grace is wonderful. To know you are loved and accepted by God. But do you know? Do you believe that? That’s takes faith. Grace does not transform unless it is received by faith. God does His bit. We have to unpack God’s gift of grace through faith. Luther’s strapline was ‘saved by grace through faith’. Let’s explore what that means practically for our lives.

I don’t know what ‘faith’ means to you? There have been some interesting reflections in this week’s bible notes written by a Lutheran Minister in the Church of Sweden, Kristina Andreasson[[1]](#endnote-1). She writes that Sweden is one of the world’s most secularized countries. You don’t often meet people who have an outspoken faith in God there she write. And science and faith are often pitted against each other, with science ranked higher. She grew up with a love for both: her father is a medical doctor, her mother a priest. Her faith says that the world is more than we can see, capture and understand. Science isn’t everything.

She writes: ‘*Martin Luther claimed that faith means allowing ourselves to be seized by the things we do not see. The world’s wisdom and science are what we know; faith brings us something else. We can know how we feel today, how the world looks today. We don’t know about tomorrow. But we can believe and have faith in how tomorrow will be. In faith there is hope. Faith keeps a little window open when the world's knowledge and facts close doors in front of us. With faith in a loving God we have a little window of love, allowing us to hope and dream'*

Martin Luther said, 'faith is having something for the heart to rely upon, every day, not only one day in the future'. He also claimed that faith is a gift put in our hearts.

Kristin Andreasson writes that her faith feels more like a gift than a choice, something she cherishes. She writes: ‘my faith is a gift that gives me hope, helps me to remember my neighbour, gives some love to bounce back upon when I fall, and gives me a loving standard to try and follow. The faith you have in your heart is a gift to treasure’.

I wonder if you would describe your faith in those terms?

Language does change over the centuries. The verb ‘believe’ and the noun ‘faith’ are used extensively in all forms of Christianity. ‘I believe’ or we believe stands at the beginning of the creeds used by most Christians. Its close relative ‘faith’ is especially important for Protestantism as the Reformation emphasised that our relationship with God is primarily about faith: we are saved by faith, not by works. Ever since, Protestants, in particular, have spoken of believing and faith as foundational to being a Christian. But the common meanings of these words in modern English are very different from their premodern and ancient Christian meanings.

Taking the word faith:

In modern English there are two sets of dictionary definitions of faith. One is identified with believing. Often it is a type of believing that is not based on proof or evidence – but a body of doctrines or dogma. A second set of definitions make it synonymous with religion: ‘what faith are you? Means ‘what religion do you belong to?

But neither of these modern meanings is what faith meant in premodern Christianity. The ancient meanings are expressed by the Latin words fidelitas and fiducia and their Greek antecedents.

Fidelitas means fidelity – faithfulness. Think of what faithfulness means in a human relationship. Though sometimes narrowly restricted to sexual behaviour, it does not mean simply not straying, but has a positive meaning of commitment, loyalty, allegiance, and attentiveness to the relationship. So, it is in our relationship with God; faith as fidelity does not mean simply not going after other gods, but commitment, loyalty, allegiance, and attentiveness to our relationship with God – in a Christian context, to God as known especially in Jesus.

Fiducia mean ‘trust’. Faith in God is more than commitment, even as it is not less. It is also deep trust in God. Here the opposite of faith is not infidelity but mistrust – that is, anxiety. A passage from Jesus in the gospels expresses this clearly. As he invites his hearers to consider the birds of the air and how God feeds them and the lilies of the fields and how God clothes them, he asks them several times ‘why do you worry… you of little faith?’ And concludes, ‘therefore do not worry’. (Matt 6.25-34, Luke 12.22-32). Little faith and worry, anxiety, go together. Deep faith – as trust, fiducia- liberates us from anxiety.

Think how free you would be if there was no anxiety in your life. This does not mean you would not have concerns for yourself or others and a passion for different kind of world. But these are quite different from anxiety.

Think of how different faith as fidelity, trust, - as fidelitas and fiducia - is from faith as believing a set of statements to be true. The latter can even increase anxiety. For example, if we believe that there is final judgment in which we are sent to either heaven or hell, how could we not be anxious? Have I believed strongly enough or behaved rightly enough? Have I believed the right things?

Is St Peter at the gates of heaven with a check list: Virgin birth (tick). Resurrection (tick). Against abortion (tick), No to Gay Marriage (tick), No to divorce (tick), no to women leaders (tick). And whatever else the church has divided itself over down the centuries and claimed some were not proper Christians and risked their salvation by believing or not believing certain things. ‘Ok good, you have the true faith, the right belief. You can come in!’

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying that beliefs don’t matter. They do. They matter very much. There are bad beliefs that can get in the way of faith, and worse. Bad beliefs have often been a source of intolerance, cruelly, injustice, violence and persecution. They take you away from faith in a loving God. So also, good beliefs matter – they can help shape us into becoming more compassionate, just, peaceful Christ centred followers.

So, beliefs matter. But, I would argue, we should not imagine that ‘believing the right things’ is all that matters. Faith is a deeper movement of the heart, of the self at its deepest level. Christian faith is allegiance to a trust in God as known in Jesus. Faith as faithfulness and trust eliminates that anxiety and frees us for transformation through God’s grace in our life.

We have been having some great and deep conversations on our Alpha Course facilitated by some great video clips. This week we heard the story of the Chilean Miners who were trapped underground when their mine collapsed a number of years ago. Jose Henriquez Gonzalez spoke about how the miners realised that there was no way out. He said the only possibility was God, it was Christ, so they needed to pray.

They realised they only had food for a few days. The other 32 miners knew that Gonzalez was a Christian and asked him to lead them in prayer. So, the first prayer was ‘Lord we are not the best men. Lord have mercy on us. Look after the young. Look after our families’. We presented our whole situation to God. And we said we cannot do anything here. All we have left is you, there is no one else to call out to. But hear our prayers. They started having prayers at noon each day and this started to produce changes in the men, in their attitude, their friendship and their unity. ‘God’s Spirit was in there with us’ said Gonzalez. ‘I haven’t seen anyone more humbled than those 33 men’

They skipped meals and ate every three days. On the 16th day the food ran out. They trusted in God. On the 17th day a probe from the surface found them. It was hailed as a complete miracle. Gonzalez said they were praying every day asking God to guide them and help them find us. 65 days after the mine had collapsed all 33 miners were rescued safely.

Gonzalez said that 22 of them made a commitment to Christ. Before any of them left Gonzalez said, ‘no one leaves until we say thank you to the Lord.’

It was a truly remarkable story, watched by millions around the world.

But following that clip Nicky Gumbel the presenter of the Alpha Course spoke about how faith can be tested sometimes by tragedy and unanswered prayer. He was playing squash with a friend when his friends had a massive heart attack and dropped down dead by his side on the squash court. He said he had never cried out to God more than he did than in that moment. His friend had six children, the youngest was 6 and the oldest was 18. He had to tell each child what had happened and he said it was the most painful thing and that was evident on the film because his voice broke with emotion. This was a man who has seen God do amazing things, bring people to faith, set people free, brought remarkable healings but now going through his own dark night of the soul. He said he went out for a walk the following day and prayed ‘God I don’t know why this has happened. I will never know why this has happened. But I’m not going to stop trusting in you. I’m not going to give up praying. I’m not going to give up – you are my only hope.

Corrie Ten Boom who as incarcerated in a Nazi concentration camp and lost her sister there said:

‘when a train goes through a tunnel and it gets dark, you don’t throw away the ticket and jump off. You sit still and trust the driver.’

Faith as fiducia (faith as trust) is trusting in the buoyancy of God[[2]](#endnote-2). Soren Kierkegaard (1813-55) one of the most important 19th century thinkers in religion and philosophy, said that faith is like floating in seventy thousand fathoms of water. Of course, no ocean is that deep, but his point is clear. If we are fearful and struggle as we float in an immeasurably deep body of water, we sink and drown. But if we trust that the water will keep us up, we float. The image goes back to the stories of Jesus walking on water, stilling storms and inviting Peter to walk to him on the sea (Matt 14.25, 8.23-27; 14.28-31). Peter does but after a few steps, he becomes afraid and begins to sink. He calls out to Jesus to save him. Jesus reaches out his hand to him, saying, ‘you of little faith, why did you doubt?’

Faith as faithfulness to God and trust in God is the product of a deeper centering on God. Faithfulness leads us to pay attention to our relationship to God – through prayer, Bible reading and study, worship, fellowship and work and witness with other believers – these are all ways that faith grows, trust deepens, experience and transformation happens within our souls. It is part of the unwrapping of the gift of grace. Being saved by grace through faith. Saved from anxiety and worry because we trust deeper in God as our relationship and journey of faith develops and lengthens.

We are justified (made right with God) freely by his grace, through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus – to be received by faith.

1. K Andreasson, IBRA Bible Notes 2017, Christian Education. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Marcus Borg, Speaking Christian, SPCK, 2011, Ch 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)