

## Second Sunday after Pentecost Matthew 9: 35 - 10:8 Year A

If someone asked you, “What is faith?” What would you say? I imagine it’s probably one of those words where you have an idea of what it is, but it may be harder to try and define it to someone. Perhaps you might say, “It’s believing in things we can’t see” or “trusting in God”

Eugene Petersen expresses it this way: “When we engage in an act of faith we give up control, we give up sensory confirmation of reality, we give up insisting on head-knowledge as our primary means of orientation in life....we chose to deal with a living God who we trust to know what he is doing... [we] embrace the mystery [and] this involves considerable risk.”<sup>1</sup> Embracing mystery and involving risk. That may be disconcerting for quite a few of us. In today’s readings, we see glimpses of the faith Petersen describes. Firstly the Genesis reading. Oh, the countless times I’ve heard Sarah scolded for her lack of faith. Usually by men.

However, all she saw were three unknown men arrive and Abraham offering them Middle Eastern hospitality. Then one says, “I will return to you in due season and your wife Sarah shall have a son”. And elderly Sarah laughed.

To be fair, I think Sarah has been short changed. If I had three guys, total strangers, suddenly acting like experts about my reproductive cycle - I’d laugh too! It’s only later, when one of the men addressed as “The Lord” challenges her on this, we become privy, as does she, to the supernatural dimensions of this encounter.

Sarah doubted and her response was entirely appropriate by how we humans understand the world. She was past child bearing age. What this story shows us is the “absurd disproportion between divine promise and human possibility”. Who hasn’t encountered that vast distance between the divine promise and human possibility? I imagine most of us usually inhabit that in-between space we could call: functional deism.

Functional deism never denies the existence or reality of God, but it also never expects His decisive action in our own personal affairs. Extraordinary promises, God acting in miraculous ways - for most of us, that only happens to other people.

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, “The Jesus Way: A conversation in following Jesus”, p.44.

We may ask rhetorically, “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” And answer in all sincerity, “No, nothing is impossible for God”. But most of us don’t expect the miraculous in our own lives, and most of us certainly don’t consider that God just might expect us to be part of his plan for the miraculous.

Which brings me to today’s gospel reading. Imagine being a disciple and Jesus calls you over and says, “Lads, you’ve been watching me, now I’ve got some work experience for you, “Proclaim the good news, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons”. We tend to read this and not think too much about the disciple’s reaction. But imagine you had been one of the disciples hearing that. Pragmatic Thomas was probably ten seconds away from a coronary. This was beyond how the world operated, way beyond their comfort zone.

Because what Jesus was asking them to do is have faith: give up sensory confirmation of reality, give up insisting on head-knowledge as the primary means of orientation, embrace the mystery [and] take considerable risk.”<sup>2</sup>

How did they feel the very first time they stepped up and commanded someone to be healed, touched a leper, raised the dead?! If it were me, I would have been petrified. I imagine most were. Still, they embraced the mystery and took a risk.

But that was over two millennium ago and that was the apostles. How do we reveal, how do we live out our faith, in 2017 Melbourne? I don’t need to cure the sick, there are excellent hospitals for that. I don’t try to raise the dead because that just seems bonkers and funeral directors would be out of a job. I have never met any lepers, and if I encounter any people with extreme mental health issues, I keep well back and trust someone refers them to the professionals. So that’s most of the job description taken care of.

What’s left is “proclaim the good news”. But even that can be problematic. People just don’t seem that interested in “religion” these days. We live in a society seemingly geared towards the opposite of faith. That values control and sensory confirmation of reality: as much head knowledge as possible to figure out this thing called life. Mystery and risk are

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, “The Jesus Way: A conversation in following Jesus”, p.44.

often viewed with suspicion and most people don't believe in a God, let alone trust him. So how do we proclaim this good news?

While living in at Trinity College, one night I sat down at a long dining table next to a young turk. He was cocky, he was smart, he was also slightly drunk. When he found out I was training for the priesthood he attacked, guns blazing. "Why do you believe the world is only 6,000 years old, why don't you believe in evolution, why do you hate gays", it went on and on. I ended up wanting to get slightly drunk! Because here I was, the "Christian", perhaps the only one he had ever engaged with. And he thought he had me all figured out, poor me, with my medieval, fear based beliefs. He wanted to set me right. Have you noticed how evangelical some atheists can be?

He was way smarter than me, and I knew I wouldn't win a debate. And that's what he wanted. He wanted to engage in robust argument, quote science, retell Christian history - all the bad bits anyway. I just listened. Then he finally got around to asking me why I was a Christian. So I told him. I can't remember it word for word, but it went something like this: "I'm a Christian because of Jesus. I've doubted God's existence, I've walked away, but Jesus is the most compelling, loving, forgiving, thought provoking person I have ever encountered. I admire the way he respected women and outsiders and I just cannot not believe, because Jesus led me to God".

Well, he sat there stunned. He finally said, "No one has ever put it like that before". And he couldn't argue against that. Because it wasn't about logic or science or even theology. It was about relationship. It was about my own personal story and who can refute your own lived experience. And I was exhibiting faith. I was choosing to take a risk because I believe that in Jesus I am forgiven and loved beyond measure and that was my good news. That was my story.

We all have those stories. Our lived experience of faith. I believe to proclaim the good news is to go out and tell that story. Not engage in arguments about science or history, or even theology. But to say: this is me, this is Jesus, this is how we got together and this is what it means to me and for me. So, what's your story and who are you going to tell?