

## Highfield Rd Uniting Church

Pilgrims of Faith

Hebrews 11:1 - 3, 8 - 16

Church Anniversary



*'Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.'*

At first, I looked at this statement from the writer of Hebrews and thought, "Yes, I can spend some time looking at what assurance means for our faith, and then looking at what conviction means

for our faith.' And then I read the same passage in the NIV translation and the words - assurance and conviction - are the other way around! And I realised that this is the letter to the Hebrews, to people familiar with Hebrew poetry and its use of parallelism. The essence of Hebrew poetry is not in rhyme or meter but in saying the same thing in two slightly different ways for both emphasis and contrast.

In the psalm we shared this morning we see:

*Surely God is my helper*

*The Lord is the upholder of my life.*

The Psalmist wants us to see not so much that God is Lord but that help means to uphold the Psalmist's life. Here in Hebrews, the point is not to look for some difference between 'assurance' and 'conviction' but to see the contrast of 'things hoped for', and 'things not seen'. To see and understand that faith looks in both directions - to the past and to the future. And then the writer takes us on a memory trip through the history of the people of Israel to make the further point that faith comes alive in action. Because, by faith, we know what God has done in the past, and because, by faith, we know that God holds the future, we are confident to follow God in acting here and now.

While in the original Greek, belief and faith are the same word, for the writer of Hebrews faith means so much more than belief as we understand the two words. This is not just belief in something or someone or ascent to some philosophical idea. Faith is belief that is acted on. When the writer talks about Abraham, the faith he is praising is the action that Abraham took in responding to God's call to set out from his home country to a land unknown and to live there as a foreigner and a visitor. Abraham was not praised for remaining in Ur and upholding the name and belief in the One True God. And all the rest of chapter 11 is devoted to other people in the history of Israel who didn't just believe, but stepped out in faith, those who did things because they were called to, even if there was risk or unknown results. That is the faith that is central to this passage. The inner confirmation that what you are about to do is based in what God has done, and the belief that when you step out and act, God will do something similar.

The heart of the Wesleyan faith that this church embodies is 'the heart strangely warmed'. The inner conviction that this faith that we live, and share, is more than religion, more than simply accepting the teaching that you are given. It is so much more than "The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it." The ancient prophets knew the same thing when they wrote that God would write the laws on the people's hearts. The Gospel writer John knew that when writing his Gospel; it is the main lesson of the story of Thomas, "blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." I don't know about God and Jesus because I have read the Bible, I read the Bible because I know God and Jesus. My experience of God reaching into my life assures me of things not seen. Whether we describe this in terms of the Spirit, or the warming of the heart, or inner peace, we are acknowledging that there is more to our faith than simply belief in a set of creeds or stories. A faith that assures us that the stories of God's action in the past in support of people reaching out in love and obedience are true, and that our hope in God's action to support our reaching out in love and obedience is not in vain.

When I saw this reading was called up for this week in the Lectionary, I casually wondered if the compilers knew it was Highfield Road's Anniversary! What a wonderful text to celebrate the faith of the founders of this church and the builders of this building. I'm sure they didn't go through an exhaustive business case analysis, or survey of whatever census data was available, or a door-to-door study of the worship trends in this suburb. They said, "This is a new area, and we are going to represent God here." They acted in faith. There was no assurance from research or confidence in analysis. They were assured through their faith that God's blessings in the past gave them confidence that God would hold their future, and so they stepped out in faith.

And not just a text to celebrate the founders, but a lesson to us now, as we - you as you look to future ministry and me as I start in a new ministry - face the future in this increasingly complex world. The long history of the people of faith - the great cloud of witnesses - shines as an example of our way ahead. Not in complex business case analysis to be assured by research that our plans and actions will be successful, but through listening for the Word of God and stepping out in faith, with that faith already assuring us of things that we hope for.

We are often held in place by both the past, and our nostalgia for things we liked and enjoyed, and our fear of failure. Instead of being grabbed by possibility and the excitement of discipleship and engagement with the world, we get held back by being 'realistic', or 'do we really think this will work', or 'we've tried that before'. There is no assurance of success if you only look at the future through the eyes of 'business model.' The assurance comes from looking through the eyes of faith - "Is this what God is calling us to do?" Our Basis of Union tells us that we are 'pilgrim people'. Not in the sense of moving from one place to another - although there are churches who have heard the call and moved to a new suburb - but in the sense that we should not be afraid of change. We should be open to the call of God to move, in faith, to new ways, new words, new forms or even new times.

We are celebrating the start of something new, something that grew out of the faith of the founders of this congregation and the builders of this church - a statement of faith that God would bless this congregation just as God had blessed the people of old. They were assured of what they hoped for through their faith, a faith that put into action the belief that this would be one more step on the building of the kingdom of God.