

Glorious Hope

There are some chapters in the Bible that tower over all the rest, like Everest in the Himalayas – they are there to inspire and encourage us and one of these chapters is Hebrews 11.

Chapter 11 gives us an overview of the men and women of the Old Testament who loved by faith. The writer to Hebrews begins with these words, “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see”. Assurance about what we do not see! This is the type of faith that God is looking for in his people.

Many years ago, a famous sculptor was commissioned to make a wood carving of the head of Abraham Lincoln. In his house there was a servant girl who was a cleaner. She observed the sculptor at work over many weeks and when it was finished, she asked if she could have a look, in astonishment, she said is that President Lincoln's head?

Yes, he said.

The servant girl thought for a moment and said, How, did Mr Borgum know that Mr Lincoln's head was in that block of wood?

Mr Borgum saw the face of Lincoln in a block of wood, even before he lifted his chisel.

That’s how Jesus works in us. He sees what we are capable of. He sees our destiny and purpose in life.

The carpenter from Nazareth selects the most unlikely of material and spends time carefully sharpening and fashioning it.

Jesus is the master sculptor, who is creating a masterpiece in our lives as he turned Peter into a man of God, the doubting Thomas into someone who would say, *My Lord and My God*.

Isaiah 64 v8 “Yet you, LORD, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand”.

Christ sees in us more than we can see in ourselves.

How did Jesus know that Peter the Rock was in Peter the Denier? How did he know that Paul the Apostle was in Saul the Persecutor? Because Jesus sees with double vision. He sees what can be and not only what is. Jesus the carpenter can see a table from a block of wood and he carried this principle

over to his spiritual work with men and women. He could see things, as they were, but he also could see them as they could be.

He could see Heaven in a mustard seed. He could see the church in a loaf of bread. He could see faith in the innocence of a little child. He could see the disciples hidden in fishermen. He could see wine in the water jars. He could see grace in the heart of Nicodemus the legal expert; he could see a village transformed through the life of one Samaritan women, and today he could see a royal household coming to faith through the dying son of a royal official.

Jesus sees in ways that we can never imagine. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. Isaiah 55 v8

As Jesus worked with people, he encountered knots and faults, but his plane and chisel and sandpaper, shaped them to become what they were. It required infinite patience and he continues to work in us.

As I've said in recent weeks, the overarching theme running throughout the Gospel of John is “Come and See” and today John is inviting us again to come and see through our eyes of faith, and to come and see Jesus as the ultimate healer, and as the one who had authority over sickness, even from a distance.

Today's reading is about two men and two worlds that collide through illness.

One rich and one poor, yet both kings in their own realm.

The Greek word to describe this rich man is *basilikos* which in Greek could mean king – more than likely he is one of King Herod's royal officials – he may even be related – a prince. He was certainly a person of status – a person who had authority. Yes, the rich came to Jesus because of his son's illness; illness affects poor and rich.

This rich royal official is a man of humility, perhaps the illness of his son drove him to his knees. His action that day would have caused a sensation... arriving with an entourage of servants; but he didn't care, his object was the healing of his son, and I'm sure that we can all relate to this story – health is your wealth as they say, and when it comes to a child or a grandchild or any child, then we are moved to do whatever we can for their healing and survival.

This royal official travelled 20 miles from Capernaum to Cana to meet with Jesus – in those days 20 miles was a fair distance! He makes the effort, probably in a royal carriage, with pomp and ceremony, but he still has to travel to meet the one who has the power to change his world.

For his world had crashed around him; all his money, all his status and power were useless, as his son lay dying. He was a man on a mission – a mission to meet with Jesus – to meet with the one that the Samaritans had crowned the day before, “Saviour of the World”.

Jesus' name and fame had begun to spread around Galilee – after all it's not every day that someone turns water into wine and saves a wedding party! Jesus had become a household name in Galilee. His miracles and teaching were being spoken about in higher places. It reached the ears of royalty and now royalty bows at the feet of the carpenter.

Little did the royal prince know that the healing was not only for his son but for him and his whole household. Like the legal expert Nicodemus, the sinful Samaritan woman at the well, and now the Royal official, Jesus was creating a people of faith.

But time was of the essence; the boy was dying; it was the royal official's last throw of the dice. No doubt, the official would have spent much money, tried many cures and healers, but obviously nothing worked, nothing changed the situation. He knew that Jesus was his last and only hope!

But there are so many things about this royal official that are admirable and genuine. He was not discouraged.

Jesus makes a rather damning statement about everyone who is looking for signs and wonders. It may well be as Jesus looked out at the crowds that had gathered, he is saying to them, “You have come because you want to see a miracle” - these are not the followers that Jesus was recruiting, he was looking for individuals, who were willing to take up their Cross and follow him – to lay down their lives in service for him - He was looking for people who are made of sterner stuff, people of faith, people who believe against all the odds; rather than the star gazers and the followers of fashion. He was looking for people who were willing to work with him to change the world and build his kingdom.

But Jesus was also making sure that this royal official was a true seeker; that he was willing for Jesus to work in his life.

The man could have easily turned his back and left Jesus when he heard Jesus' rebuke to the sensation seekers - but like the Syrophenician woman in Matthew's gospel, when rebuked by Jesus she said that, "Even the dogs look for scraps that fall from the table" – that's faith! and so this royal official too was the real thing – he was looking for scraps that fall from the grace-filled table of Jesus – just a scrap – just a touch – just a prayer, just a word of hope, that his son would be healed.

This is a story, that tells us that we must be earnest before Jesus. We must come to him in faith believing that he has the power - Come to Jesus believing that he has the power to work in your lives, the power to forgive sins, the power to give you eternal life, the power over death and the power to transform tragedy. Paul wrote, "All things work together for the good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose".

But what we see in this royal man is a man of faith. Jesus said to him, "Go, your son, will live". Because Jesus had already seen the official's son running and enjoying life.

The man took Jesus at his word and departed. This is real faith!

No questions asked, no fuss made, his prayers have been answered.

The words of Jesus must have been music to his ears, your Son will live. He had faith enough to get up off his begging knees and walk the 20 miles back to Capernaum.

The man took Jesus at his word and departed. Faith is written all over this encounter.

The very essence of Christian faith is to trust in the words of Jesus and to obey them, how do we hear those words? A Sunday service – possibly, but I think, even more effective is our own private devotions with Jesus, and as we read the scriptures and gospels, our faith will grow.

Last Saturday, I was at a Christian conference in Kilmarnock called Tidelines. The guest preacher was Rev Kenny Borthwick. Kenny was a Church of Scotland minister for over 40 years. He is now retired but living on the island of Lewis and still involved in ministry there.

In his morning sermon, Kenny shared that he can now tell who the original folks in Lewis are, the ones born in Lewis, don't speak of living on Lewis but living in Lewis.

Those who live in Lewis have grown up in the environment and the culture and they know what it is to really live in Lewis. They are not just living on an island but living in the island.

Paul encouraged his hearers to live in Christ, and that's what it means to have real faith – it's not just a head knowledge of Jesus but a living experience of him – living in Him.

That day in the hot Middle East sunshine, this royal man was a man who surrendered his life to Jesus. This beautiful story has a great ending for we are told that on his way home, he met with his servants, who had come out to meet him, and they brought him good news, good news of the healing of his son, at the exact time, that Jesus told him, "Your son will live!" But the story gets even better, for we are told that his whole household came to faith. The faith of one man was to transform a whole community and his household would have been considerable – wife, children, extended family and servants.

This royal man surrendered his life to Jesus and gave his life to him. He believed that Jesus could do the impossible. He had seen what Jesus could do. He had experienced it and there was nothing left for him to do than surrender his life.

He had begun with a sense of desperate need; and his sense of need had turned into an overwhelming love. This is the glory of the Christian faith – that God can meet us in our most desperate places, in the wilderness and deserts of our lives, and there we can meet with his gracious presence, and it's in those moments that we feel God nearest us. This is faith at its best.

But before we end, the question that was on my mind when I was preparing this was, why did it take the near death of a boy to bring this royal official and his household to come to faith? Could not Jesus have found an easier way? Why put someone through this suffering?

It opens up the whole question of suffering and the problem of evil.

The reality is that we have much suffering in this world, all world religions have attempted to give a response to this problem. The Christian faith points back to creation and the opening story in the Bible when the perfect world became a mess through humanity's disobedience – we were given the gift of free will, but unable to use that for good. The result is what we see on a daily basis – a world out of control; we were meant to live for ever but illness entered the world, death came with it – natural disasters happen

and pain and suffering are all around us. It's the imperfect world that we live in.

This royal official would not deny that his life had been hit by tragedy, a consequence of the fall but the Christian faith does not leave things there – it points to a great hope that we have.

As one of our members, struggling with her health, said to me this week – we have a glorious hope! What a beautiful way to look at life. In the midst of her struggles, and they are many, she can hold on to this glorious hope.

The Christian faith points to a day coming of great reversal, a glorious hope, when a new kingdom will arrive and all things will be reversed – there will be no more pain or suffering or separation – glorious hope! and here in this story we see it beginning – God sent his Son to begin the great reversal, when people will be healed, the dead will be raised, and new life will abound forever.

John tells us that this is another sign – the second sign – the first sign one was the transformation of water into wine, the second was the healing of a boy on death's bed – all signs pointing towards the greatest sign, which is the resurrection of Jesus – this is the pivotal moment when the curse on Earth was broken and a new creation begun.

You see, the Christian faith is a faith that transforms life – it gives us eyes to see the impossible, to see what Jesus sees.

The servant girl asked the question, did Mr Borgum know that Abraham Lincoln's head was in the block of wood, and the answer of course is yes, he did, he had the eyes of faith to see it.

What does Jesus see in you and me?

How are your eyes of faith this morning? Jesus is not looking for perfect faith – he is looking for you to take the first step.

A wonderful story is often told about an incident in the life of Poland's famous concert pianist, Jan Paderewski.

A mother took her 10-year-old boy to a concert by Paderewski to expose him to the talent of the great pianist. She hoped as she did to encourage her son in his piano lessons, which he had just begun.

They arrived early at the concert and were seated near the front. Standing alone on the stage was a marvellous Steinway grand piano. As they waited

for the concert to begin, the mother entered into a conversation with the people beside her.

Eventually, eight o'clock came, and the lights began to dim. Everyone turned their attention to the stage and the grand piano. The mother looked up and was suddenly horrified. Her son was sitting at the piano and banging out with one little finger, "Chopsticks" "Oh no," she thought, "How am I going to get him down?"

As she began to make her way to the platform, the great Jan Paderewski himself appeared on stage. He went over and sat down beside the child. He whispered in the child's ear, "Don't quit; keep playing!" As the little boy continued to play, Paderewski reached down with his left hand and began to fill in the bass part.

Then with his right arm around the little boy, he added a running obbligato. Together, the old master and the young novice held the crowd mesmerised.

That's the Gospel. We walk on stage, like a child and start plunking Chopsticks and God sees us and throws his arms around us and says, keep playing, keep on going. At the same time, he plays a beautiful concerto. Some day we'll be in Heaven together, and we'll get to hear the concerto God is playing in all of our lives and we'll see the glorious hope that God has prepared for us.

As God's children, many times we Christians are tempted to feel like we are spending our lives pecking out meaningless and inconsequential little tunes, thinking as we do that our gifts are just too small for God to use in any significant way. And yet, that is all He desires of us: our willingness to step out in faltering faith and say, Lord this is what I can give, bless it.

Whenever we attempt something in His name, He comes along beside us, sits down next to us, and whispers in our ear, "Don't quit; keep playing." Then, with His subtle guidance and able assistance, we suddenly find ourselves making beautiful music both with and for God, and enriching the lives of ourselves and of others as we glorify Him.

So, the next time you are tempted to think that your faith is insignificant, or that your life is otherwise without meaning, remember this little story along with the words of the Apostle Paul: "I can do everything through Him who gives me strength." (Phil. 4:13)

Amen.