

Sermon on Sunday 16 August

by Rev. Wendy Sellers

Faith

In 1620 over a 100 people set sail from Plymouth, Devon, on the Mayflower. Their journey of almost 10 weeks took them to the east coast of what is now the USA. On arrival they built a settlement, and with a lack of originality they called it Plymouth.

They had, of course, made the journey because they were Puritans who suffered religious persecution in Europe. As a group the puritans or pilgrims were hugely influential in the way the American culture developed.

One surprising thing they influenced was girls' names. They favoured not the names of saints or Bible characters, but instead often named their daughters after Christian virtues. So, girls were named Joy, Hope, Charity, Patience and Mercy - possibly names it was quite hard to live up to. It seems virtues were not generally felt to be male - sorry, boys.

Another girls' name was Faith and it is faith we are going to think about today.

In last week's 'Walking on the Water' Gospel reading, Jesus told off the disciples for their lack of faith. Today, a woman's faith results in Jesus healing her daughter, who is possessed by a demon.

Yet, what actually is faith? Why did the disciples lack it and the woman have it?

Faith is tricky to define. It can't be that faith is based on knowledge or relationship. Because if that were so the disciples would have lots of it. They were good Jewish boys who knew their scripture. They were brought up in 'the faith'. They had spent plenty of time with Jesus. The woman had none of those advantages.

Similarly, if faith is simply a gift from God, why did he withhold that gift from the disciples and give it to the woman?

And if faith were based on actions, again the disciples should be better off. They've been busy supporting and following Jesus. The woman merely stops for a chat.

Now, I wish I was going to resolve any or all of those issues. However, chances are we will end up with more questions. But let's at least attempt to explore together that mysterious thing called faith.

The dictionary definition is two-part. Firstly, faith is a complete trust or confidence in someone or something. Synonyms, that is words with similar meaning, include trust, belief, confidence, dependence, hope and expectation. You can have faith in anything. So, I have faith in the recipes of Mary Berry, for example.

The second part is, "A strong belief in the doctrines of a religion, based on spiritual conviction rather than proof". Synonyms include church, ideology, dogma, creed and doctrine.

When people refer to someone's faith, they are usually talking about the second definition. Yet, of course, that is not the lived experience of most people of faith. Religion and faith are not the same things.

Last week, when Jesus told the disciples that they were 'of little faith', he was not suggesting that their doctrine was weak. He was talking about their lack of trust. The opposite of faith, according to my dictionary is mistrust. The disciples mistrusted that Jesus could and would save them.

And when Jesus tells the Canaanite woman that her faith has meant her daughter will be healed, he is not suggesting that she has suddenly learnt and absorbed the creeds of Judaism. He is suggesting that she has enough confidence in Him that the healing miracle can occur.

It would seem that the general definition of faith as trust, belief, confidence, dependence, hope and expectation is a lot more helpful than the religious one.

So, why do only some people have faith? I hate to cheat here, but the thing is, I don't think only some people have it. I agree only some people profess to be religious. But I think all humans, and possibly even all sentient beings or even created things, have faith.

Because faith is about the things we hope for - not the things we receive. If you receive what you ask for, you no longer need faith.

I'll say that again.

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So, faith is about looking forward. The disciples in the boat last week believed in Jesus only after he'd walked on water, saved a drowning Peter and calmed the storm. They had proof of God's power and believed after the event – hence their smallness of faith.

The Canaanite woman was just desperately hoping that Jesus would do something, without any evidence that he could or might help her. So, she had true faith, and her faith was deep because her desperation was immense. The disciples were 'of little faith' and she had it in bucketloads.

Yet, the two stories suggest that the amount of faith isn't actually relevant. In both cases Jesus saves. He doesn't count the disciples' faith and find it wanting. He doesn't weigh up the woman's faith and throw in an extra miracle. Both situations are resolved in a way Jesus feels is right.

So, I've come up with a few things which faith isn't. You can't have it after the event and you don't have to learn it. It isn't a random gift and you don't earn it. It isn't the same as religion, nor based on experiences. It's not based on closeness to God, because anyone can trust in Him.

So much for the negatives. What is it – it is a hope, even a confidence, in God's presence in all things. So, what faith should do is change the way we live our lives. When the disciples lacked faith, things went wrong. Their boat was tossed on the waves and blown off course. They nearly drowned. When the woman showed faith, her circumstances were dramatically changed – her desperately ill daughter was cured. Faith is trust in the Lord, through every circumstance. It is the confidence

that God is in every situation, no matter that we cannot foresee a resolution to our troubles.

And why do we need it? The Jewish word for faith is Emunah, which means support. A life of faith is a life where we allow God to support us as we face what lies ahead, in the sure and certain hope that there is no situation from which God is absent.

But what the New Testament seems to be telling us is that faith is not on its own. The disciples lacked faith but had other resources – experiences with Jesus, knowledge of scripture. In particular they loved Jesus and he loved them. So, when faith was lacking, it seems love filled the gap. And the Canaanite woman had no basis for her faith at all. Nor did she know and love Jesus. They'd barely met. Yet she had a huge desperate love for her daughter and it seems that, too, bridged the gap.

What have we learnt in my ramblings about faith? Perhaps that it can't be considered on its own. We do need faith but we need other virtues, too – step forward hope, charity, mercy, joy and all those other Puritan girls' names. We need you all. But most of all it seems we need love.

Just before we come up to communion, we often use the words 'draw near with faith'. Alan sometimes adds 'and love'. Draw near with faith and love. You know, I think he might actually be onto something!

