

If you were here last Sunday, you will remember that all our readings focussed on faith. We heard the reassurance of God that Abraham's descendants (his followers in faithfulness) would be as numerous as the stars in heaven. The Letter of the Hebrews talked of faith as *'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.'* (Hebrews 11: 1), and in the Gospel, Jesus told us to always be ready to travel lightly on a journey of proclaiming the Good News to all we meet and in everything we do, with the reassurance that no matter what resistance or difficulties we might meet, we are not to be scared of this task: *'Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the Kingdom.'* (Luke 12: 32) It all sounds rather soft and fluffy.

So what are we to make of today's readings on this continuing journey of the exploration of our faith? At first reading, the vivid passage from Hebrews might want us to say, 'Help – stop the boat. I want to get off!' And it all starts off so well! We are taken from the liberty of the Exodus, the collapse of the walls of Jericho as Joshua leads the people into the Promised Land. Then a whole host of other heroes of faith: Gideon, Barak, Samson, David, Samuel. A wonderful pantheon of Biblical characters being led on an invincible journey of faith which sweeps all before.

But then the picture grows bleaker. Suddenly those led by faith seem to be the losers and the writer talks perhaps too vividly of terrible torture and death. Faithfulness now seems a loser's journey leading not to triumph over the enemy but to the very edges of society: *'They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes,'* people dwelling on the edges - destitute, persecuted and tormented. Is this passage really what being a Christian is all about? Is this what my Baptismal life calls me to?

As I thought about it, a conversation started up in my imagination: 'Why are you talking about things going pear-shaped? Surely faith leads to an easy journey?'

'But,' says the author of the Letter in bewilderment, 'I thought that that you would realise that Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, died an agonising death to lead you on a journey towards understanding the true meaning of God's love.'

'I didn't read the small print.....'

The Gospel seems no more compromising. Jesus talks of division because of our faith in him, and this makes us feel uncomfortable. We have already been told to be prepared and watchful as part of our calling to proclaim the Kingdom. Now Jesus tells us of the fire with which we are to work to reveal the Good News. Jeremiah has been called by fire; God's **word** is like fire. The imagery of fire runs through all of the scriptures. We are called to be people inhabited by the fire of the Holy Spirit in all we do. Moses didn't use a fire extinguisher on the Burning Bush, the Apostles didn't take a hose to the flames of Pentecost. So neither must we allow our constant call to proclamation be extinguished, no matter what. This recognition of division by Jesus will seem so far removed from the figure we might have in our mind. As I have said before, forget Jesus, meek and mild. As John the Baptist said earlier in the Gospel, the Messiah would baptise humanity with fire and the

Holy Spirit. Yes, rejoice in Jesus the healer, the miracle worker, the face of God's compassion to the woman dragged before him by the hardened Pharisees and all of those living on the edges. Rejoice in the transfigured one on the mountain top.

However, the picture can only be complete when we understand the fulness of the identity of God within humanity in the face of Jesus; to suffering and death itself. Through this identification we are led to the wonder of new lives of Resurrection in the knowledge of the abundance of Divine Love. This is our great message of the fire of hope to humanity. This is our call.

If we search Luke's Gospel further, we can see the markers being laid down from the start. When Jesus is born, the angels proclaim peace on earth although qualifying this peace to those whom God favours – an assurance to those who follow Jesus. Mary is warned by Simeon that her heart will be pierced by the sword of sorrow when Jesus is presented at the Temple. These two illustrations reveal faithfulness. Yet there is no smugness. Even his mother will experience despair and endure unimaginable grief. But faith in God brings the assurance of hope, and we all have a part to play in its revelation, because hope is not hope unless it is more than wishful thinking. It is a quality of our actions, even if it might terrify us to carry out this work or speak out. It is notable that we often find an embedded joy of faith in those who at the receiving end of the brutality of this world which is absent from the handwringing of those who wonder what the world is coming to, yet don't want to rock the boat.

The pressure within society is to divorce the spiritual from everyday life; compartmentalizing private faith from morality, culture, politics and economics. Remember those words of Alistair Campbell during the Blair years? 'We don't do religion.'

Forget it. Our faith is the antithesis of this approach and must inform what to do in every aspect of our lives and our interaction with the rest of society. Jesus talks of division, but this is **not** a God-driven division. Rather, it is proclaiming and revealing the better way – the way of growth towards the fulness of life and holiness which leads to true happiness. The brokenness of the Church brought about through revelations of abuse of so many kinds means that we are not some 'goody two-shoes' organisation preaching down to everyone else. Far from it – indeed, it is when clerics forget this and think merely of hierarchical purity that things go disastrously wrong. The Church can identify with the wounds within society because it is wounded itself. We are in the long haul with society together.

You and I, as members of the Body of Christ, **do** have the answer to the questions of life. The division Jesus talks of does not seek to reject or diminish others. If today's Gospel makes us feel uncomfortable, that is good. Ultimately it is a call to constantly re-evaluate our lives and interaction with the world - a call to transformation. In this we help to heal the world and reveal that in Jesus Christ is true wholeness, true life. In this journey we are never alone; surrounded by so a great cloud of witnesses, we are strengthened as we look upon the face of Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross to draw us to the knowledge of the fullness of God's love.



Valentin de Boulogne (before 3 January 1591 – 19 August 1632)

Jeremiah 23: 23-29

²³ Am I a God near by, says the Lord, and not a God far off? ²⁴ Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? says the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the Lord. ²⁵ I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!' ²⁶ How long? Will the hearts of the prophets ever turn back—those who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart? ²⁷ They plan to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, just as their ancestors forgot my name for Baal. ²⁸ Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? says the Lord. ²⁹ Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?

Hebrews 11: 29- 12:2

²⁹ By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. ³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹ By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient,^[k] because she had received the spies in peace.

³² And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵ Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two,^[l] they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats,

destitute, persecuted, tormented—³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

³⁹ Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of ^[b] the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Luke 12: 49-56

⁴⁹ 'I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! ⁵¹ Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! ⁵² From now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; ⁵³ they will be divided:

father against son

and son against father,

mother against daughter

and daughter against mother,

mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law

and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.'

⁵⁴ He also said to the crowds, 'When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, "It is going to rain"; and so it happens. ⁵⁵ And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, "There will be scorching heat"; and it happens. ⁵⁶ You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?