

Hebrews 11:8-22

Faith is a journey which rests on promises

"Sometimes I feel almost on fire with the immensity of this: each of us is a person, alive, growing and relating. From the moment we awake to the moment we fall asleep, we think, we feel, we choose, we speak, we act, not as isolated individuals but as persons among people. And underneath everything lies trust. From friendships of children to agreements among nations life depends on trust. The highest reaches of love and life depend on trust. Are there any questions which are more important to each of us than "Whom can I trust?" "How can I be sure?"

Those are the opening words of Os Guinness' excellent book "Doubt." In that chapter Guinness put his finger on something fundamental in life – you cannot live without trust.

Our culture shouts at us "trust me." We may be going through an economic downturn but we are the culture that can put on the Olympic Games. We are the culture that produced the industrial revolution, the NHS and even the Spice Girls. Entrust yourself to this culture and you will be ok.

Two tragic deaths this week paint a different picture. Who knows why the film director Tony Scott jumped off the Vincent Thomas Bridge in Los Angeles last Sunday. One thing is for sure. A man at the pinnacle of what our culture can offer found it not worth living for.

The second death was the tragic case of Tony Nicklinson. Whatever you think of the rights and wrongs of assisted suicide I at least couldn't help but be moved by the tragedy of a fit and healthy man struck down by a stroke and left longing only for death. Even if our culture had allowed him to end his life at the hands of his loved ones, it could not deliver him from a tragedy that made him long for that.

We don't live in a culture that delivers the fundamental things we wish it would. So why should we trust it?

Today in our study of Hebrews 11 we will look at Abraham. Abraham lived about 2000 years before Christ, but in a world in some ways remarkably like ours, the great civilisation of Ur. It too shouted "trust me." It was the most centralised bureaucracy that the world had yet known. For people like Abraham it offered wealth and comfort that no one in history had ever enjoyed. It seemed to promise so much and yet scratch below the surface and it was empty. As empty as all the great civilisations have been.

Abraham, as we will see, was called to leave Ur, and to go an unpromising stretch of semi-arid hill country called Canaan. Who knows what he thought as he left, let alone what his relatives thought and the friends that he left behind. But the truth is that Ur is now a desert, and its god's can only be found on the pages of Wikipedia. But Abraham's descendants founded the civilisation and religion of Israel, which finally, just as God had promised, became the birthplace of Jesus, and the seedbed of the global faith which is called Christianity.

The writer of Hebrews, writing a few decades after the life of Christ, has been calling his readers to trust the God of the Bible. We have seen that his readers lived in uncertain times in the first few decades of the life of the early church at the heart of the greatest civilisation that the world had ever known – first century Rome.

Rome shouted with a loud voice – "Trust me". And it coupled this with a threat. If you step outside of the protection of Rome, you will not only be vulnerable to a thousand dangers from the world, but you will also have the wrath of Rome to deal with.

Understandably the Christians were tempted to do everything they could to lead an uncontroversial quiet life. Especially hiding under the umbrella of traditional Judaism rather than standing out as a radical new global faith.

And understandably in our culture which demands that we trust it, and live within its boundaries – whether that be not sharing our faith at work, or not challenging the new standards of sexual morality or simply living by the accepted unwritten rules that life is just about relationships, money, holidays, comfort, and putting off death for as long as possible – understandably we are tempted to live within the boundaries set for us by our culture.

But that is at best a half-Christian life. That is a life that trusts the so-called certainties of our culture more than it trusts God. As we look at the life of Abraham in Hebrews 11 this morning I want us to hear the call the that writer to the Hebrews is giving us. It is the call to be a part of the civilisation which has never fallen but which in every age looks much more vulnerable than the one which seems to be dominant – whether that be Ur, or Rome, or the new global civilisation that some like to call Technopolis.

The first thing that we need to see is that faith steps into the unknown.

➤ *Faith steps into the unknown*

📖 **Hebrews 11:8**

Even though he didn't know where he was going

An old evangelistic tool was called the “Four Spiritual Laws”. The first law was “God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life.” That may be true but he is not going to tell you the details of that plan at the start. Just as he didn't tell Abraham. God said

“Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. Gen 12:1

Leave the place that you know and love. Leave the culture that you know and love. Leave the family that you know and love. And set out to a land you have not yet seen.

The journey to what became known as the promised land, seems to have been one of repeated refinements to his faith. Firstly he left with his father, but with him he only got as far as a place called Harran. Only when his father died did he set out again towards Canaan. When he arrived there with his nephew Lot, they divided. Lot went to the obvious place with fertile land and pleasant towns, while Abraham went to the hill country in obedience to God. Specifically Lot is said to have chosen the valleys as a result of “looking.” He followed only what he could see, but Abraham followed the call of God.

Here is the first lesson of faith then. Faith *is* a matter of stepping into the unknown. Our culture tells us that it controls the future. We pay our taxes and the NHS will keep us healthy, the government will keep us safe, and the banks will keep us wealthy. It's all a lie.

On the other hand the Bible gives us countless examples - Abraham at the pinnacle - of people who learned to distrust their culture, and step out in obedience to God. In one sense it is deeply unknown – God doesn't pretend to tell you the things that the world tries to assure you of – the career you will have, the future of your marriage, the day of your death. But in another sense it is absolutely certain. When God says “go” he comes too.

That step into the unknown is likely to be multiple small steps as it was for Abraham. Faith is a journey. Every journey starts with a single step. Every journey comprises step after step after step.

It may be for you that the step that God requires of you is one of the early ones, even perhaps the first. You now realise - as Abraham knew about Ur - as the first Christians knew about Rome - that our culture cannot deliver on the promises it makes. Perhaps you were here last week and you saw that everyone actually has to live by faith one way or another. Because many of the most important things in life are unseeable. And perhaps you have been persuaded by the way in which the faith of believers in the promises of God has been vindicated again and again in history – often after their death as it was for Abraham. Perhaps you have come to believe that Christian faith is a reasonable trust.

If so there is a step to take. “Go to the land I will show you.” You need to commit yourself to follow Christ wherever he leads you. At the end of this service you will be wise to tell someone you have made that step.

It may be the you came to faith a little while ago but there is another step God is calling you to take. Perhaps it’s baptism. The bible doesn’t say that you get baptised long after you are converted. Baptism is an initial step of obedience. Is God calling you take that step?

Perhaps it is a relationship which you know must end. Perhaps it is job choice which doesn’t look sensible from the world’s point of view but you know it is right before God.

And everything in you cries but this is a step into the unknown. Unqualified commitment to Christ? Giving up on the security that that person, that job, that status, that income gave me? I would be a fool!

The missionary Jim Elliot felt called to reach out to a violent tribe of South American people called the Auca. After making overtures of friendship he flew into that remote area, landing his plane by a river. The Auca killed him and his four companions. But Elliot’s example led to a great upsurge in missionary endeavour, the conversion of a large proportion of those same people, and of course a promised eternal reward for Elliot. Was he a fool? Shortly before he was martyred Elliot wrote

He is not fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose

And some of you here are facing the inevitable end to your life in the foreseeable future. Everyone makes that step into an unseen place. But Christian, you began to walk towards that unseen world years ago. It is not a plunge into the unknown darkness, these are your last few steps towards the land that God will show you. Walk them with confidence.

And then faith accepts being a foreigner.

➤ ***Faith accepts being a foreigner***

📖 **Hebrews 11:9**

Abraham never owned the promised land. The most he owned was his burial plot. He lived in the land that he was promised but as a stranger, an alien, a foreigner.

That is our calling as Christians. We are promised that God will one day restore his whole creation, and we will live eternally in that new creation. As Jesus put it we will “inherit the earth.” But not now!

We long for a future day as Abraham did.

 **Hebrews 11:10**

This has all sorts of implications for us. We will be considering this in much more detail in the autumn because we will be studying the letter called 1 Peter. There Peter takes up this idea by addressing his readers as “scattered exiles” (1 Peter 1:1)

Here we must just settle this in our hearts for a moment. We are not at home here.

We may live in houses, but Christians are called to consider them as provisionally as we would a tent. Judy and I spent the last couple of nights in a tent in the Brecon Beacons. It was great fun despite the torrential rain, the dog which stole our food, and the ache in our backs from not being able to stand up. I managed to cook sirloin steak and chips with pepper sauce and mushrooms in a red wine jus, all on a Trangia! I loved it. But I was glad to get home.

Imagine a life lived with that degree of insecurity, provisionality, simplicity, mobility. It has great joys but also significant trials. That though is what we are called to.

Christian you are not at home, so don't try to live like that. Take a job, but not to get on in this world – to follow Christ. Buy a house but not to put down roots – use it as a base from which to serve Christ. We are even told to marry, not because that is the final culmination of life's pleasures, but because it is a partnership within which we can display the glory of Christ.

And of course the most fundamental way in which we live in tents, according to the bible, is that we live in a mortal body, which perishes just like canvas. I once bought an expedition grade tent which I took up the Himalayas. I still had it when the children were small but UV light had taken it's toll on the nylon. I remember one of the children ripping it like it was a bit of tissue paper. The most robust body is a tent which will finally give way. But we are promised a “house” a resurrection body which will not perish.

But for now we live as foreigners in this world, we live in tents.

Which brings us to the final lesson that Abraham teaches us.

➤ ***Faith trusts in resurrection life***

Abraham and his wife Sarah received a child miraculously as they trusted in God.

 **Hebrews 11:11**

But more than that Abraham learned to entrust even the life of his precious son entirely to God.

 **Hebrews 11:17-19**

It is a weird story full of moral questions. God tells Abraham to kill his only son. This would not be just murder, it would be the termination of all hope of God fulfilling his promise that through Isaac he would have innumerable offspring. Abraham cannot see how God is going to get himself out of this moral and practical conundrum.

But he has learned something. God is the God of miraculous life. Somehow he is absolutely confident Isaac is not going to die, and God's promise is not going to be snuffed out.

And he was right. God provides a ram as a substitute, and Isaac does not die, and Abraham has learned that faith in God is faith in his resurrection power.

Hence the resurrection of Jesus is so central in the Bible. I said last week that it is historically so well attested that from a historical perspective it must be considered "proven." It stands as the final vindication of Abraham's faith, and the final promise of ours.

So who and what will you trust? As Os Guinness said this is one of the most fundamental questions of life. Will you trust a culture which promises so much and yet delivers so little as every great culture has done?

Or will you trust the God who has not disappointed his followers for thousands of years, whose promises all come true, and who finally offers us resurrection life.