

Call to worship - Psalm 85:8-13

I will listen to what God the Lord says; he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants— but let them not turn to folly. Surely his salvation is near those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land. Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven. The Lord will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest. Righteousness goes before him and prepares the way for his steps.

Song: *by M.E Byrne (180-1931)*

1. Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart, naught be all else to me save that Thou art;
Thou my best thought, by day or by night, waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.
2. Lord be my Wisdom and Thou my true Word, I ever with Thee and Thou with me Lord;
Thou my great Father, I Thy true son, Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one.
3. Be Thou my battle-shield, sword for the fight; Be Thou my dignity, Thou my delight;
Thou my soul's shelter, Thou my high tower.
Raise Thou me heavenward, O power of my power.
4. Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise, Thou my inheritance, now and always;
Thou and Thou only, first in my heart, high King of Heaven my treasure Thou art.
5. High King of heaven, my victory won,
May I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's sun!
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall, still be my Vision, O Ruler of all.

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Sharing

Encourage those present to give brief testimonies of the faithfulness of God, however small.

Prayer

Acknowledging God's goodness, holiness and sovereignty

Give thanks for met needs in the local community.

Give thanks for each of the testimonies just shared and acknowledge God's goodness demonstrated in them.

Make petitions for the practical and spiritual needs of all present, the local community, and the country.

Song – This I believe (the creed) *by B Fielding, M Crocker*

1. Our Father everlasting, the all creating One, God Almighty
Through Your Holy Spirit conceiving Christ the Son, Jesus our Saviour

Faith Is Reality

2. Our Judge and our Defender, suffered and crucified, forgiveness is in You
Descended into darkness You rose in glorious life, forever seated high

*I believe in God our Father, I believe in Christ the Son
I believe in the Holy Spirit, Our God is three in One
I believe in the resurrection, That we will rise again
For I believe in the Name of Jesus*

I believe in You, I believe You rose again
I believe that Jesus Christ is Lord

*I believe in life eternal, I believe in the virgin birth
I believe in the saints' communion and in Your holy Church
I believe in the resurrection when Jesus comes again
For I believe in the Name of Jesus*

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Scripture:

- Hebrews 11: 1-6, 13-16

Message: Faith is what is Real

Today I want to talk about the nature of faith – what it is, how it functions, but also the specifics of what our common faith – that we are saved into a great inheritance through faith alone in Jesus Christ.

To that end let's consider another great story – a myth. King Arthur, the hidden heir of a great kingdom, whose authority to rule was established by prophetic signs. A man who would bring an unruly, dark, violent kingdom together in peace – a peace that would bring out all that was the best in its people. One which celebrated brotherhood, and service, and chivalry. But like all things in this world, this king, and this kingdom, would be destroyed from the inside out; betrayed by those closest to him, his wife and his best friend, Arthur would become ill, an illness that couldn't be healed except by the grail – the legendary cup of the last supper. So Arthur's knights waste themselves, many perishing in a quest that would last decades searching for the grail and the country falls to ruin, plague and famine. But still there is hope – an unlikely foolish knight Percival, would not give up faith, and he endures to bring the grail back to Arthur, reviving the King and the kingdom. And even though Arthur's final battle is pyrrhic, its not the end – Arthur will return again when the kingdom is in its hour of greatest need.

Many people have described that story as a true myth. Even if the details are not true, it helps us towards being better, nobler, more trustworthy people. That giving our lives in the service of others, in service of the good is a worthwhile goal. That we should approach our lives with faith.

But we as Christians have something infinitely better. C.S. Lewis puts it like this:
"I was by now too experienced in literary criticism to regard the Gospels as myths. They had not the mythical taste. And yet the very matter which they set

Faith Is Reality

down in their artless, historical fashion . . . was precisely the matter of the great myths. If ever a myth had become fact, had been incarnated, it would be just like this. And nothing else in all literature was just like this . . . Here and only here in all time the myth must have become fact; the Word, flesh; God, Man. This is not 'a religion', nor 'a philosophy'. It is the summing up and actuality of them all."

That's from *Surprised by Joy*. We too might be surprised to discover that our faith is not a strange, abstract creed that we have to hope in without evidence. In fact it stands far above any other faith, philosophy or creed, as sensible, as meaningful, and as verifiable. No other world view, no philosophy can claim all of those things the way our faith does. It is reality.

First, our faith is sensible – that is, it offers a credible and rational explanation for the universe. It does not make absurd claims, like suggesting that the universe created itself. The fine-tuned order of creation, perilously perfect for life, implies a creator, the reality of which is described in Romans 1, but also increasingly acknowledged by contemporary science. Let's just consider this testimony by three atheist physicists, that was recently published in a top scientific journal.

Considering the physics of dark matter, they said:

"Arranging the universe as we think it is arranged would have required a miracle; an unknown agent, namely beyond space and time, intervened in the evolution of the universe for reasons of its own."

Brothers and sisters - we know those reasons. That the trinity of eternal Father, Son and Spirit, out of their mutual love, overflowed creation into being, and made us to know and glorify Him. Ours is a sensible, rational faith.

Second, our faith is meaningful. I touched on this earlier when I spoke about the mythic story of Arthur. That story was meaningful to us. It depicted us in truth, our struggle in a way that we could recognise and understand. In the same way, more than any story ever told, the gospel of Jesus is the rosetta stone to humanity. Suffering, healing and glory, all mixed together in a way that makes sense of who we are and gives us purpose. It even sheds light on things that we could never imagine understanding, like the motivations of God and his plans for us, his plans for the world. We humans are creatures of meaning – take it away and we literally die. No religion or creed provides meaning and purpose like the gospel. That wonderful story of God's only son, giving his life so that we could live. That is something worth dying for, and something worth living for.

Third, and I think this is perhaps the most extraordinary, our faith is verifiable. The core historical fact, even at a distance of over 2000 years, that Jesus was crucified by the roman governor Pilate, is historically incontrovertible. We have multiple sources that agree with each other, external evidence from Roman sources, medical evidence within the stories, all pointing to the fact that Jesus was executed at a specific place and time, and that he was really dead. And the testimony of over 500 people after his death to say that he was alive again – that they'd spoken to him, touched him, had fish and bread with him!

No religion has this. We're not even sure the Bhuddha was a real person. Islam doesn't have sources for almost 500 years after Mohammed. It is an extraordinary miracle that after two millennia we can say with confidence that Christ died, and

Faith Is Reality

three days he rose again from the dead. Our faith is not just “take it by faith”, or as people like to say now “just trust me bro”. It is based on verifiable historical fact.

Now I want to say a couple of things about faith in a slightly different vain – looking at how it functions, how it works. First that we are the blessed recipients of a revealed and revealing faith. A revealed and revealing faith. In Hebrews today we read “by faith we understand”. You see, faith is more than belief - it is the knowing of reality, the grasping of something true. When we approach God in humility, with faith, we open our eyes spiritually, we can finally see reality.

Faith in us is like a prism, or a pair of glasses – it clarifies and focuses our sight. If you’ll indulge me for a second, could everyone who needs glasses please take them off? What happens when we do? The world is muddy and unclear, we barely know what we’re looking at, and notably we lose human connection with the people around us. We have to “take it on faith” that it’s even the person we knew sitting there. When we put them back on – please do put your glasses back on everyone – we see the world as it really is, and our relationships are restored. Faith lets us see the world as it is, and restores our connection with God and humanity.

Faith is indeed something or someone we know, but it’s also something that further reveals the world to us. We might call this the power of truth; only a true belief is powerful. An untrue belief is what? It’s useless. It’s Meaningless. It’s a lie. And every time we use it, it leads us astray. If we try to predict the world by a false faith, we fail.

Lewis described it this way:

“What flows into you from the myth is not truth but reality (truth is always *about* something, but reality is that *about which* truth is), and, therefore, every myth becomes the father of innumerable truth.”

Faith is not blind or ignorant, it is assurance and confidence resting on a bed of truth. Not despite the facts, but because of revealed truth. Not just belief, but real knowledge, real understanding that leads being powerful and oriented in a confusing world.

When Jesus gave the sermon on mount he revealed reality to us. When He rose from the dead, he ripped the temple curtain in two, revealing truth, reality, the Holy God. Faith is merely trusting in that true revelation, and believing it in the way we live our lives.

So this faith we stand in – sensible, meaningful and verifiable – it leads us to reality. It leads us to a firm, real hope. Hebrews tells us that faith is confidence in what we hope for, and assurance about what we do not see. That confidence isn’t just wishful thinking, it’s not just hoping for a good outcome. We are taking the truth revealed to us by Christ, and projecting it forward. Because Christ died and rose again I have faith. I know He is the truth. I trust in His power to save. I know that his inheritance for me is secure.

In the 1980 version of the Arthur story, Excalibur, there is a great scene up on a hill. All of Arthur’s knights are meeting there, and there is great joy, and exuberance. They are at the height of their success, they have secured the whole country, it’s all been brought together in peace. And Merlin stops them, chides them, warns them to remember this high point, remember this King’s victory, because “It is the doom of men that they forget”. True words. It is the doom of men that they forget. But it is the hope of men that

Faith Is Reality

they remember the Lord - that they remember that Jesus came for us, gave Himself for us, and will come again for us, gathering all His children to the Father. Faith is remembering that love, that sacrifice, and that hope, in the way we live our lives now, until we see Him face to face.

Song – In Christ Alone

1. In Christ alone my hope is found, he is my light, my strength, my song;
This corner-stone, this solid ground, firm through the fiercest drought and storm.
What heights of Love, what depths of peace,
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease!
My comforter, my all in all, here in the love of Christ I stand.
2. In Christ alone! Who took on flesh, fullness of God in helpless babe!
This gift of love and righteousness, scorned by the ones He came to save;
Till on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied
For every sin on Him was laid; Here in the death of Christ I live.
3. There in the ground His body lay light of the world by darkness slain
Then bursting forth in glorious day up from the grave He rose again!
And as He stands in victory sin's curse has lost its grip on me,
For I am His and He is mine, bought with the precious blood of Christ.
4. No guilt in life, no fear in death, this is the power of Christ in me
From life's first cry to final breath, Jesus commands my destiny.
No power of hell, no scheme of man can ever pluck me from His hand;
Till He returns or calls me home, here in the power of Christ I'll stand.

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Benediction – 1 Peter 1: 3-9

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

This service prepared by Mark Holgate for HopeNet SA