

What brings fulfilment in our life? What fills us with hope and joy?

On Wednesday I received a message from a friend in Australia who is coming to the UK next year. She was letting me know her plans! Then she made what I thought was an interesting comment. She said ' I don't go on facebook much, but based on the few posts I have seen of yours life is going well, you seem fulfilled! '.

I was intrigued by this statement because I wondered what it said about the modern way we live and encounter each other. I rarely post anything on my Australian facebook page, and it is usually only when I have visitors, or my nieces do something. I guess the happy highlights for want of a better word. I was intrigued that this is now the perception that my Australian friends have of my life – that I have happy highlights!

In fairness I am happy, but it was the context that intrigued me as much as its reality. How do we assess that someone we know is happy or that they are full of hope. Facebook is such a false environment that it seems like a strange place to assess whether a person is content or not.

This week has been a week full of stories for me as I have had the privilege to sit alongside a number of people and listen to their journeys. Some were full of hope, and the sources of this hope was incredibly varied.

During life, there will be many moments which fill us with joy or happiness for lots of different reasons, as there will be moments that fill us with despair – but these are the marks of our humanity – that we have lived and known and experienced – and our faith becomes part of what defines this humanity – something which strengthens us and calls us to look to the future, no matter how dark the present might feel.

All our readings today focus our hearts and minds on the nature of the fulfilment and joy which God wants us to have. A fulfilment that comes from living out our humanity – and in our living also recognising and celebrating God within our midst too.

The opening of Genesis 15 is the covenant which God makes with Abram. It is a story which promises hope. Abram comes to God with concerns and worries and is looking for some hope and certainty. Something which is often hard to give, and God says to Abram ' Do not be afraid.' It is important to recognize that the covenant is not an "agreement" worked out between Abram and God; Abram is sound asleep when God makes this covenant with him (see Genesis 15:12). This covenant is a divine promise to Abram to which God binds the divine self<sup>1</sup>.

The other interesting thing in this passage is that Abram ( Genesis 15:6) believes in God without having any concrete evidence that God's promise will come to pass,

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2941](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2941)

which is what our reading from Hebrews reflects on. (see Hebrews 11:1, 8-12). Abram's faith has been enabled by God's addressing the specific issue opened up by Abram's question.

In the passage from Genesis God begins by saying 'Do not be afraid'. This is the same message we hear in Luke's Gospel as Jesus promises that God has given everything so that we do not need to be afraid. Jesus reinforces this by talking about how God provides. The reminders are around the gift of life and creation, the gift of eternal life, the gift of the Holy Spirit in Baptism, and the gift of Christ's body and blood in Communion<sup>2</sup>. Then within this is a reminder to look at our priorities – how are we living this gift of creation – this gift of possibility? Are we noticing when God is with us, and all that God is giving us – or do we allow ourselves to be distracted? It is the same question to us now!

These are difficult times, the world is in a mess and we want God to fix it.

But God wants more than just for things to be fixed – God wants a relationship, and wants us to be open to the possibilities of what is before us.

Today, and over the next 3 Sunday's we are going to be hearing a series of readings from the letter to the Hebrews. We rarely get to hear from this letter. It is possibly one of the most complex of the epistles, and has a very different style. It is not written by either Peter or Paul, and authorship is debated. There are many scholars who see this letter as a continuation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the ending of the Old Testament if you like – which draws together the images and stories of the Hebrew people into the context of Christ as the Temple. Regardless of its overall purpose what we do know is that the people it was written to were a community under siege.

The community to whom Hebrews was written had undergone great hardship, including public ridicule, confiscation of property, and imprisonment (10:32-34). Because of the pressures put upon the community, some had given up faith(6:4-6), others avoided worship (10:25). Still others were weary of the suffering and disheartened by the delay in the coming of the Lord that would confirm their belief (3:14), a belief that came at great cost. Into this situation comes one of the most quoted verses in the bible when it comes to faith:

*'Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible'*

So Faith, rather than being something ultimately dependent upon us, comes to us at God's own initiative through God's Word, and engenders a hope-filled response to the promises of God. (as with Abram). This response of trust in God makes "visible" -- through the lives of the assembly of believers -- what otherwise would remain

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2950](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2950)

“invisible.” In other words, one who trusts God’s promises is *God’s own* witness to the new creation that is breaking into our “everyday” visible world through the gospel of Christ Jesus.

In short, God’s *invisible* work of new creation becomes *visible* (incarnate) in the life of the one who trusts God.

The common thread of all our readings today – trust in the relationship – even when all else seems to be overwhelming, and as we discussed last week – take responsibility for the things that we can change now; to become ourselves – our true selves not a virtual presence version.

And when it feels too hard, too painful – when we want to cry out to God ‘why!’ – then maybe we can turn back to the opening verse of our gospel reading:

*"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."*

"Do not be afraid" is the hallmark of good news through Scripture and occurs multiple times in Luke's story of Jesus as well. Typically, "Do not be afraid," is the rhetorical prelude to the announcement of God's mighty and saving deeds. And it is the starting point and anchor for everything else in this passage. It is God's good pleasure - God's intention, plan, and delight - to give us the kingdom!

What Jesus is saying to the disciples is at heart quite simple, and yet is the most difficult thing for us humans. Regardless of the temptations or trials of life – God really wants you to have faith, to enjoy faith, to inherit the Kingdom of heaven.

Faith may well be the hardest thing we ever have to work at, but it is built on the relationship with God we have in prayer and on our ability to let go.

The key however for us as Christians however is that this is not about us, it is not a spiritual journey based on self-actualisation – or even about our knowing (though of course some of that may happen along the way). but rather discovering that as we give ourselves away in relationship and service we find a deeper sense of self than we’d imagined possible. We are born for community and find a sense of self and meaning and purpose as we trust God’s promises and give ourselves away in love.<sup>3</sup>

In the end then, the primary call of the church today is to become a place where we are so rooted in the promise of God, and reminded of our identity as God’s beloved children, and affirmed in our inherent self-worth and dignity, that we can, indeed, see all those around us as similarly beloved and deserving of self-worth, dignity, and

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/08/pentecost-12-c-what-would-you-do/>

God's good pleasure.<sup>4</sup>A place where we might be nurtured to find joy and fulfilment.

So, as we go into this week, as we continue to enjoy the pace of August – or maybe we even feel challenged by it - Christ says to us... Do not be afraid, Faith, is not dependent upon us, but rather God is made visible when we dare to hope in God, when we value the relationship; and even more when we dare to rejoice in God's good pleasure. For in doing so, we may truly find fulfilment! Amen

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/08/pentecost-12-c-what-would-you-do/>