**Two Rivers Mission Community**

**Values 2: Faith**

**Hebrews 11.1-10 & 12.1-3 Matthew 17.14-21**

Last week we started to look at our ‘values’ – what sort of churches do we think God is calling us to be?

And we began with the value of ‘love’.

Now ‘love’ for Christians sounds a bit ‘motherhood and apple pie’ doesn’t it!

You can’t really disagree with it as a value to underpin our churches.

God is love, and he calls us to love him and love others.

But we did think a little in the last sermon about how love can be difficult and even costly… as we put ourselves out for others, seek each other’s good even if it means saying hard things… and as we attempt to even love our enemies.

This week we come on to the second value which we hope will characterise the life of our churches… and that value is ‘faith’.

Now I hope that it goes without saying that faith in Jesus should be at the heart of our church life and mission…

Although I think at times the Church has fallen into the trap of thinking and behaving like any other ‘caring’ organisation and it’s been hard to tell what difference faith is actually making…

It can feel like this is what society and government want – for us to run food banks but not speak about Jesus whilst we do it!

We must not fall into that trap.

Faith in Jesus should permeate all that we are and all that we do.

Of course, people in our churches will be at different points on their faith journey. Some people will be just starting out, others will have been walking with the Lord for many years.

Some may not even yet have put their faith in Jesus and come to spiritual new birth as God’s children. They are still exploring… but it’s great that they are making that journey of faith as part of our church families.

Does this, then, mean that ’faith’ is a ‘motherhood and apple pie value’?... so obvious that its not worth singling out.

Well, yes and no…

As I reflect on faith, on the one hand I think it is a great help and comfort in life… and surely something everyone would want…

Its faith in the saving blood of Jesus that reassures me that my sins are forgiven, that God has brought me out of darkness and into his marvellous light, and made me an heir of heaven.

Its faith that enables me to believe the promises of God that Jesus is with me always, that nothing can separate me from God’s love, that God will not allow me to be tempted beyond what I can bear and that even if I walk through fire I will not be burned.

In the words of Hebrews 11.1: “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”

Hope and reassurance! What wonderful things.

But if faith is something that brings us hope and reassurance, faith is also something that presents us with a challenge.

Jesus said in Matthew 17.20: ‘Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, “Move from here to there,” and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.’

Wow! Really?

I don’t know about you, but for me these words of Jesus are quite tricky… I haven’t moved many mountains recently!

Hebrews 11 gives us a whole list of people from the Old Testament who did move mountains… metaphorical ones if not literal ones. Amongst others:

It reminds us of Noah who in faith built the ark, through which God saved his family and all living things.

It reminds us of Abraham and Sarah who obediently left home and family to travel at God’s command to a new country.

It reminds us of Moses, who in faith led God’s people from slavey in Egypt through the desert to the Promised Land.

It reminds us of many others who faced great hardships and trials but remained faithful.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews reminds us of these heroes of faith in order to spur us on… Hebrews 12.1: ‘Let us throw off everything that hinders us and the sin that so easily entangles and let us run with perseverance the race marked out before us.’

So, faith sets a vision before us, that challenges us to do great things for God.

Its this value of faith, as much as the hope and assurance, that I hope we will display and grow in our lives together.

Its faith that *doesn’t* say,

‘We tried that and it didn’t work’,

or ‘it might have worked there but it won’t here’

or, ‘we can’t afford it…’

or ‘no one will come’

or ‘it won’t make any difference anyway’.

*It is* a faith that says,

“All things are possible through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4.13)

And then prays as if only prayer works

And then works as if only work works.

It’s a faith that says it is worth sharing the Gospel with people and inviting them to pray a prayer of commitment to Jesus.

It’s a faith that says it is worth laying hands on the sick and praying for healing.

It’s a faith that says people can be set free from sin.

Relationships can be healed.

Communities transformed.

It’s a ‘yes’ faith rather than an ‘I don’t think so’ faith.

Now, you might say to me, ‘Gary, its great to be optimistic, but you have to be realistic too… you’ve got to live in the real world.’

But Christian faith is very definitely very different from blind optimism.

How so?

Well, Christian faith is rooted in God – a God who created all things out of nothing (Hebrews 11.3). If God can make the whole universe from naught… and if he can raise Jesus from the dead… then there is surely nothing that is beyond him.

Christian faith is rooted in God’s promises. We have faith for what God says he will do.

And Christian faith is rooted in experience… we have so many examples from scripture and Christian history of God’s miraculous provision for his people who step out in faith. We can therefore have confidence that our unchanging God will do the same in our generation too.

So, what might embracing the value of faith look like in our churches?

Well, I think it might include:

* Choosing to believe that God is with us and for us; that he is more than able to answer our prayers, more than able to supply our needs, more than able to work in us and through us to grow his church and build his kingdom
* It will include seeking his will for his church and our communities and then in faith praying for these things to happen and working for these things to happen.
* It will involve taking risks – of *stepping out* in faith. If we only attempt things we can achieve on our own then there is no need for God to show up and do anything. Its when we take a risk and attempt something we know is beyond us, then there is room for God to intervene *to his glory*.
* It might look like summoning up our courage to share our faith, to pray for someone, to attempt a project which we know won’t work unless God provides.
* It won’t mean doing something stupid and then expecting God to bail us out – we mustn’t put the Lord our God to the test; but when God has set us a vision and said go for it, it will mean going for it even if we can’t see how it will work out.
* It won’t mean everything we try works and every prayer we pray gets the answer we want… but it will mean seeing enough of God to give us hope that we might see more.
* It may mean giving financially beyond what we feel is comfortable.
* It may mean fasting and praying and getting down on our knees and weeping before God and imploring him to act.
* It may mean getting laughed at, or being disliked.

What, I wonder will our PCC meetings and Mission Community Joint Council and church services look like as we put this value of faith into practice?

I can’t wait to find out!

I wanted to end today with one last comment and with a story.

The comment is this:

St Paul lists faith as a spiritual gift. We all, I trust have faith and can exercise faith.

But some people have a special gift of faith, given by the Holy Spirit.

Who are the people of faith in your church? Who can ‘see’ the thing as yet unseen that God wants to do?

Who has the faith to pray for those things?

Who has the faith to step out and go for it?

Encourage these people and give them the opportunity to use their gift.

The story is this (and please forgive me for using an example from a previous parish!)…

In one of my previous parishes the church had for a long time had a vision to make their building a warm, useable space for the whole community. It had never managed it.

But we felt this was what God wanted.

So, we met as a PCC, we talked, we prayed, we made our own pledges to the cost.

We went to the church with the vision… and told them that the PCC had already pledged 20% of what we thought was needed.

The path to removing pews, putting in new heating and lighting, a tea station and toilets, meeting rooms, was not an easy one. The cost was twice what we budgeted!

But we believed, we prayed, we gave, we worked….

And miraculously we got there.

Our moto was Nehemiah 6.16: “they saw that this work had been accomplished with then help of our God”.

The people in our village were amazed that we ever completed the project. When they asked how we did it, we simply said, ‘with the help of our God’. It was a project we so obviously couldn’t have done on our own and it was a joy that the glory for its completion went to God. It was a wonderful witness.

Let’s pray that as churches we might grow in faith…

Obvious… yes.

Giving us hope and reassurance… definitely

But also giving us a challenge, so that as we step out of the boat we find, *with our eyes fixed on Jesus*, that we can walk on water.