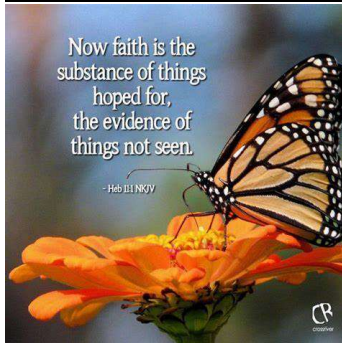


SERMON, 6 AUGUST 2022 – Hebrews 11, Luke 12.32-40



In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

It’s a lovely verse. The King James Bible says “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” I love the way that faith and hope are intertwined – they go together so well.



In my life I have waited on many railway platforms, and as I wait for a train - I have faith, I have hope. I can relax because I am in a comfortable place, I may not be in control, but I am good. One thing that has changed in the last few years is that I also have an app and can check exactly where the train is – and now I have my Senior Railcard, I have even more plans to go off and explore.



On Friday evening, as part of my continuing birthday celebrations, we went off to the Welshpool and Llanfair Railway for their fish and chip special. It is a lovely narrow gauge line and, like most narrow gauge lines, it has rather fierce gradients. It was a heavy train, six carriages, one more than they usually run, and “The Earl”, the original Great Western locomotive, is now 120 years old. I got chatting to the fireman, who told me it was his first solo outing

as a passed fireman, and he was a bit worried about having enough fire to keep his train on the move. The driver told him not to worry, to have faith, he'd be fine. We did have a laugh because the last two carriages had been block booked by the local Conservative Association – the driver said that if we had any problems keeping the train on the move, we'd simply uncouple the back coaches and leave them behind.



I am glad to say the driver's faith in his fireman was fully justified. There was one slightly longer station stop while we got up steam, but we made it. And the fireman was absolutely shattered – faith is justified, but hard work is involved.

Faith, hope – evidence, conviction – all good positive stuff. Not always easy to be positive – in the life of our country, or the life of the church.

FOOD BANK SUNDAY



It is going to be a long hard winter – a reminder that today is Food Bank Sunday, and our care of other people remains vital. The church doing what society is failing to do.

How about in the rest of our lives? What does faith mean to us? After all, we are people with plenty – nice homes, warm beds, Sunday lunch to look forward to. Even if our health isn't brilliant, we expect to be cared for – even if we're worried about getting old, we expect to be able to afford the care we will need. Most of us have loving relationships, people who care for us – we are so fortunate compared to most people on this earth. Most people who have so much, seem to have all they need – and certainly I am well aware that most people in our parishes don't feel they have much need of religious faith. They have what they need.



That is not the case for everyone – meeting with my children on Wednesday, and Harry is talking about food poverty in Newcastle – supermarkets are scaling back the amount of food they give his charity to turn into community meals, because they are under financial pressure, and he is struggling to find people willing to drive to collect surplus food because his drivers can't afford the petrol (they have to pay for it before they can claim the mileage back). In GP land in Leeds, Hannah can't get people accepted by the hospitals for the care they need, she can't get an ambulance to collect a patient from her surgery for at least six hours, and the large, angry man who is shouting at her, threatening to commit suicide by driving his car at speed into other cars, he won't be seen by the Mental Health Crisis team for several days. I am amazed that both of my children have the faith to keep going, although I can see the toll it is taking on them.



Life has always been tough, it has always taken faith to try and build a better world against the forces of evil ranged against us. No doubt my predecessors made sure the poor were fed from the Vicarage kitchen or through the charity of church members – the poor are always with us. “By faith our ancestors received approval.” So many people in the history of our church, our religion, have been men and women of faith. In my darkest hours after the death of my boys, I would sit in St Mary's Ponteland trying to say my prayers, and on the wall was a memorial to Anne Bryne and two of her sisters, daughters of a previous Vicar of Ponteland – they all died of the fever with just a few days. I hope he had the faith to keep going. These buildings speak to us of faith and all that's gone before – the individual stories, the community story, the story of Christianity.



Thinking back to Easter 2020 when our churches were locked, and Geoff and Vicky lit an Easter Candle overlooking St Matthew's, and I lit an Easter Candle outside the gates of St Edmund's and beside the Yew Tree. Faith has continued even through so many tumultuous events, the Black Death, the Reformation, two World Wars and the decimation of the traditional industries of our part of the world. That is not to say I am sanguine about those events – people suffered and died in the Black death, when the Reformation destroyed the fabric of Society. People suffered and died in two World Wars, and people continue to die today because of austerity and lack of meaningful jobs.



Life was not easy for Abraham – and his faith was tested. He had a faith in a real God, the knowledge that God, the Creator and sustainer of the universe. I love the image of him in the desert, looking up at the sky, counting all the stars – I have to say that the image of Abraham becomes intertwined with Peter O'Toole as Lawrence of Arabia. Counting all the stars, but the promise of God that he and Sarah would be parents, the founders of a dynasty, that promise did not seem to be coming true. So many people, says the writer to the Hebrews, so many people who have gone before. They were people who had been born and died before Christ came, before the Incarnation, before his death and resurrection – and they are part of the community of faith.



I love being part of the communion of faith. I took communion to Ann Fabiano on Monday. It is not easy when her sight is not good enough to read the service booklet, and when her hearing is not good enough to easily hear what I am saying, but we shared bread and wine together, and it was good. Both of us were librarians many years ago, and we got chatting about our library experiences – remembering mobile libraries we had worked on and sharing stories of people we had served. There was something supremely ironic about two librarians talking loudly about their librarian days, but it was a pleasure.



But faith is not just to be shared with friends. Interesting that Abraham and Sarah are described as “strangers and foreigners” on earth. People who had no proper homeland – a travelling, wandering race. Most of us cannot really understand that – though there are plenty of people in our city who can. My faith is challenged when I have to cope with people I am a little afraid of, my faith is deepened when I try and understand them, when I try and walk with them – when I see their faith in a world that so often turns against them.



All of us are on a journey, through this world and into the future. Most people ignore what is to come until the last possible moment – those of us who are involved in a community, a community of older people, we do not (we cannot) ignore it. The other week I went to see someone as his life was drawing to a close. He was very frail, but he opened his eyes, gave me a smile, and his lips moved as we said the Lord’s Prayer.

“They desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one”.

I do believe that God is not ashamed to be called their God, he’s not ashamed to be our God – he loves us, and holds us in his love. There is a city prepared for us – it’s a good vision, and one that we hold on to. In the meantime, we’ll show God’s love in our city, our community, our world – and to the individuals we journey with.