

Abraham, by faith.

One of the classic statements about how we view our relationship with God – at least within the reformed churches - is this: *by grace we are saved, through faith*. That statement is used in our usual communion liturgy.

By grace we are saved, through faith.

We are saved by the grace of God, shown through his son Jesus. Through faith. If we have faith in Jesus, we are saved. Faith is important. We talk about it a lot. We often want to build up our faith – after all, if faith is a good thing, then having more of it is even better. But as we read the bible, we find that it doesn't work quite like that: In Luke 17:6 the apostles say to Jesus "Lord increase our faith!", and Jesus responds by saying that "faith as small a mustard seed" can perform miracles. Faith as small as a mustard seed – the smallest unit generally used in the bible – that is all that's needed.

One illustration of this 'saved by grace through faith' that is often used is of someone swimming at the beach, getting caught in a rip, and realising that they're drowning. So they wave.

The lifesavers spot the drowning person waving, grab the lifeline, plunge into the surf, and drag the drowning swimmer to safety. The lifesavers do the saving, but they probably wouldn't have done the saving if the swimmer hadn't waved. And it really doesn't matter whether the swimmer's wave was a big sweeping whole arm movement, or if it was simply a raised hand.

Now, it's not a perfect analogy – but it's on the right track: Imagine a saved swimmer, when asked what happened, boasting about how well they'd waved? It just doesn't make sense to concentrate on the signal rather than the saving that results.

And so it is: By grace we are saved, through faith. And a little bit of faith can be enough.

And faith, we've heard in the first verse of this chapter of Hebrews, is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

This chapter, chapter eleven, of Hebrews, is sometimes called the “Hall of fame of faith”. The writer to the Hebrews takes us through the history of the people of God through particular people: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David and Samuel.

Amongst these heroes of the Old Testament, two stand out – just on the amount of words devoted to their stories: Those two are Abraham and Moses, who each have about seven verses devoted to their stories. Today, we’re looking at the story of Abraham.

Abraham lived a very long and eventful life. The writer to the Hebrews tells us how Abraham obeyed God and went to a foreign land, where he made his home – albeit still living in a tent – where he and Sarah finally had an heir – Isaac, and then Isaac’s son, Jacob. And ultimately, how God’s promises to Abraham, which we heard about in our Old Testament reading (Genesis 15:1-6) – to have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky – were fulfilled.

Of course, there was a lot more to Abraham’s life than we read about in the letter to the Hebrews – and a lot of it isn’t good. As we read about the heroes of the Old Testament, we find that a lot of what they do isn’t good.

We find that Jacob tricked his brother Esau out of his inheritance; Moses killed an Egyptian and hid the body; and David forced himself on Bathsheba – and then arranged to have Bathsheba’s husband killed – and so on.

And Abraham? Well, he lied a few times and said Sarah wasn’t his wife to save his own skin, and he fathered a child – Ishmael – with his wife’s servant Hagar.

Of course, there is a lot more – mostly good – to Abraham’s story than the writer to Hebrews includes in this passage. So I think we need to consider why the things included are included. Why these events, and not and not the others? Well, I think the answer is in how each of these events is introduced – in fact how all the things are introduced in this section of Hebrews, and that’s “by faith”.

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place... obeyed and went; By faith he made his home in the promised land; by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children.

We're told that these things were done *by faith* – not that they were done faithfully, or in faith, or even with faith but they were done by faith.

Abraham and Sarah acted by faith. They did things that – on the face of them – made no sense to do. They were brave things to do, they certainly weren't 'safe options' and they were certainly outside their comfort zones – but they did them *because they had faith in God*.

They did things that most people wouldn't do. They did things that weren't logical. They did things that were unexpected. But that's something we see time and time again as we read the scriptures. We see God working through the unexpected: It's the second sons that carry the kingdom of God forward and it's the shepherd boy David who defeats Goliath and so on.

Right up until we arrive at the New Testament, and we see Jesus leaving the glories of heaven and becoming one of us, born as a helpless baby in Bethlehem. The sinless Jesus arriving at the Jordan to be baptised along with the sinful people that he came to save. Ultimately, the innocent Jesus giving himself up to be beaten and humiliated and raised up on the cross, for the sake of each one of us.

That is not the way of the world. And it doesn't make sense if you think about these things the way the world does.

Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians "...the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Cor 1:18)

I'm sure you'll know by now that that is one of my favourite bible verses – there's so much in it, and it tells us something important about the faith we have. If we think about it in terms worldly wisdom, the message of the cross is foolishness: It simply doesn't make sense, if you think about things the way the world does – why would God, who created all things, who is all powerful, choose to become incarnate – to send his only begotten Son into his own creation and allow that creation to kill him? It's absurd.

But if we have faith, we know those very same things as the power of God.

Finally, in this section on Abraham, the letter to the Hebrews tells us, “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.”

But this time, it's not “By faith Abraham...” it's “All these people were still living by faith...”

Even when they died, they were still looking forward. They weren't going to see all of God's promises fulfilled, yet they still trusted that those promises would be fulfilled.

So what are we to make of all this today. Here, in St Ives in the early 21st century?

Is it that we should have faith?

Yes, but we need to be clear on what our faith is in, because people have faith in all sorts of things. Faith in the goodness of human nature. Faith in technology. Faith that it will all work out in the end.

Our faith needs to be in Jesus - the pioneer and perfecter of our faith as the next chapter of the letter to the Hebrews (12:2) tells us.

But even more than having that faith, our lives need to be changed by that faith. Our actions need to reflect our faith. We need to act, as Abraham did, by faith.

If we look to the great commission at the end of Matthew's gospel, we read that Jesus said to the disciples “...go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Jesus said you are the ones, you are the witnesses. Not people who are better trained or equipped. Not people who are more numerous.

Not people who are more talented or more skilled. Not people who are braver or smarter or younger or have fewer responsibilities. But you. Your faith must lead to action.

It's the same with us. We are the inheritors of that same commission. Our faith has to lead to our action. We can't wait for others to take action for us.

And as we look back over the history of the church, we can see that people have acted by faith time and time again.

And often, they haven't lived to see their work come to fruition. Our society generally wants quick returns and prompt answers. Remember saving up to buy things? Remember lay-but? Both pretty rare these days – people today want things now, not some time down the track.

But as we look back, we can see that many people have contributed so much, and contributed in unexpected ways. People have come to faith simply because they've been greeted with a friendly smile. People have benefited from our charity. People have been encouraged because of the fellowship of faithful Christians.

I heard a story of about prison chaplain: One day after the worship service in the prison, he was approached by a prisoner. The prisoner had believed the gospel and wanted to be baptised! This was great news! And the chaplain told the prisoner that he'd really felt the Holy Spirit flowing through him as he'd preached the sermon, and before the service he'd been praying that one of the prisoners would come to faith – and his prayer had been answered.

“Don't get too carried away, chaplain”, said the prisoner, “You're the fourteenth.”

“The fourteenth?”

“Oh, I reckon over the years I've heard from thirteen other chaplains, and they've all been praying and preaching and doing the right things... you just happen to be the fourteenth.”

Would the other chaplains have been disappointed that this fellow wasn't converted on their watch? Perhaps. But I'm sure they would have been delighted that he was, ultimately. But each of those chaplains were acting by faith. They were sharing the gospel even though there was no immediate response from the prisoners. And they'd each helped this fellow come to know Jesus.

And that's how it should be with our congregation here. As people visit this building and we witness to them. We should be showing them God's love in action, not because that will get them to join our congregation, but we will be acting by faith, and maybe our actions will help them come to know God's love shown in Jesus.

One of the great things about being a Christian and part of the church – the body of Christ – is that we all get to be part of God's plan. We all get to act by faith: We get to use our talents and our skills and our situations. But to do that we need to trust in God and act on that trust. To step out in faith – which may very well mean stepping out of our comfort zones, too.

We have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us, and empowering us. Giving us the gifts that enable us to serve God better. As we think about living 'by faith', we can see the importance of the Spirit's fruit patience, as we wait on the promises of God.

And of course, we have the model of all of those who've gone before us. The great cloud of witnesses as the writer to the Hebrews describes them (Hebrews 12:1), all of those who did things by faith. Those that we read about in chapter 11 of the letter to the Hebrews, those that we read about in the New Testament and in church history. And, of course, those people who we've known ourselves, who have shown us what it means not just to be faithful, but to act by faith.

And through it all we can take heart that God is in control. Ultimately, God has a plan, and it is our privilege to be part of that plan, to respond in faith to what God has done for us in Jesus.

Let us all open our hearts to the Holy Spirit, to step out bravely and faithfully as Abraham did so that in all times and all places, we will act by faith.

To the glory of God.

Amen.