

You may not realise this, but some people outside the church think Anglican clergy are a little odd. Actually, sometimes people inside the church think clergy are a little odd! Jokes aside, most clergy, those present included, are fairly ordinary, average human beings who have strengths and weaknesses like everyone else. The reason non-church people think we're odd is that they just don't know much about us – they don't know what we do, nor when we do it. It's clear to them that we work on Sundays but what do we do for the rest of the week? And they don't know how we're trained nor how we're selected for ministry – we're just a bit of a mystery really. I think this is great, because, once people get to know us a bit and are prepared to risk asking personal questions, they inevitably ask something like, 'What made you become a minister in the Anglican Church.' Part of me is always tempted to say 'It was the pay' - but I don't, because these questions, I think, are God given opportunities to help someone to get a bit more of an understanding about Christian faith. I find that most non-church people have little idea about the nature of Christian faith, and many, I think, labour under misconceptions. The danger is that they may, and often do, reject a caricature of what faith really involves.

There's a story told of a schoolboy who, when asked to give his understanding of faith, thought for a moment and then said, 'Faith is trying hard to believe what you know isn't true!'

I suspect that, while they wouldn't be game to put it quite so bluntly, many people in our community might share that view, though they might soften it by saying, for example that intellectually they can't accept what Christians believe - as though faith consists of giving assent to a number of theological propositions. Now faith is underpinned by theological and historical truth – and this can be summarised as theological propositions – we do this in the Creeds, for example. But the statements in the Creed describe the underpinning of faith, they are not faith itself. They are like

an architectural blueprint which diagrams a building but is not the building! Faith is more than a blueprint!

Other people seem to think of faith as some kind of inner strength which we Christians (and especially clergy!) can generate within ourselves, but which is beyond them.

In our Gospel reading for today, the apostles, no less, appear to be thinking of faith in this way. They are confronted by the challenges involved in forgiving someone who repeatedly harms them. The apostles, like us, know this is a very tough thing to do, and yet Jesus commands it, so they ask Jesus to increase their faith, as though faith is something that can be poured into them. Jesus' reply is enigmatic but suggests that the ability to forgive is actually from gift of God which we receive if we will just act on God's commands and promises – that is, if we will really trust in them. A mustard seed of faith which trusts in God's command will open us to a power to forgive which will result in outcomes we would not have thought possible. Jesus seems to be saying 'You don't need more faith, you just need faith – the faith that trusts in the goodness of God and acts accordingly.' Faith then, is not trying hard to believe what you know isn't true, nor is it assent to a set of theological statements, nor is it an inner strength which only a few possess – faith is trust, and trust is a personal relationship which draws its strength and its joy and its hope from the faithfulness of the one in whom we trust.

This is the understanding of faith which we see in the other readings set for today.

Most scholars think the book of Lamentations was written by the prophet Jeremiah, so we'll go with that. Lamentations was written after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586BC. It voices the despair of the Jews who had been taken prisoner and exiled in Babylon as they remember the horrors of the siege of Jerusalem and the savagery and desecration which followed when the walls

eventually fell. I'm not sure that we can imagine the depth of grief and misery experienced by the exiles. In that part of Lamentations set for the Psalm, Jeremiah laments: (3.19)

*The thought of my affliction and my homelessness  
is wormwood and gall!*

<sup>20</sup> *My soul continually thinks of it  
and is bowed down within me.*

But, in the midst of his affliction there's a turning point and it occurs as Jeremiah recalls the faithfulness of God which time and time again had rescued the people of Israel from troubles which were often of their own making. He continues:

*But this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:*

*The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,  
his mercies never come to an end;*

<sup>23</sup> *they are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.*

<sup>24</sup> *'The LORD is my portion,' says my soul,  
'therefore I will hope in him.'*

You'll note that in the text the word LORD is in capital letters. Where this occurs in our English Bibles it indicates the personal name of God. In other words, Jeremiah is calling to mind the God he has come to know and trust in a personal way. In that moment he recalls the steadfast love and the great faithfulness of God and this recollection, even in the midst of his misery, gives him hope for the future. Jeremiah doesn't somehow generate this hope within himself; it is a gift of God which arises in him as he recognises afresh the faithfulness of God.

The hope which is gifted to Jeremiah illustrates the nature of faith as trust – it's a personal relationship which draws its strength and its joy and its hope from the faithfulness and goodness of the God in whom we trust.

Our passage from 2 Timothy was written at a time when its author, St Paul was at a very low ebb. It's dated around 66-67AD during the reign of the emperor Nero, a time when Christians were subject to state sanctioned violence and Paul himself had been imprisoned. In contrast to his earlier detention, when he was held under house arrest, this time Paul's chained in a dungeon like a common criminal. His friends had a hard time finding out where he was being kept, and some had deserted him, no doubt fearful that they too might be persecuted. It's clear from the letter that Paul is lonely, that he's suffering, and that he's concerned for the welfare of the churches he had founded. But, not unlike Jeremiah, in the midst of his suffering Paul write to Timothy:

*<sup>8</sup>Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, . . . <sup>11</sup>For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher,<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>12</sup>and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust. (2 Tim 1.8 and 11-12)*

*'For this reason I suffer . . . but I am not ashamed . . . for I know the one in whom I have put my trust'.* In the context of his imprisonment – deeply shameful for Roman citizen like Paul – this is a magnificent statement of faith. But note where that faith draws its strength. Paul can affirm his willingness to suffer imprisonment and shame because he knows the one in whom he has put his trust. Once again, we are back to faith as a personal relationship which draws its strength and its joy and its hope from the love and faithfulness of the God in whom we trust. For Paul, as for us, the character of God is revealed most fully in and through the Lord Jesus Christ, and

nowhere do we see God's love and faithfulness, and indeed power, more fully demonstrated than at the cross and in his resurrection. *'This is how we know that God loves us* (Paul writes to the Romans) *that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.* (Romans 5.8) and a bit later he notes that nothing can separate us from this depth of love - not height nor depth, not life nor even death, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8.38) It is this knowledge of God's love and faithfulness that enables Paul to make that wonderful statement of faith, *'I am not ashamed . . . for I know the one in whom I have put my trust'*. It's a statement we can all adopt, when difficult times come upon us, as they will. We may struggle, we may even suffer, but the hope we have in Christ is not disturbed because each of us can say, 'I know the one in whom I have put my trust.' Faith is a personal relationship which draws its strength and its joy and its hope from the character of the God in whom we trust.

*<sup>13</sup> May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.* (Romans 15.13)

Amen.