

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.
Heb 11.1.

Christmas Day and New Year's Eve are great fun, but I have to admit that the best day of all is 2 January when the whole madness is over. Isn't it great to be back to normal? It also means that we can return to our study of *Hebrews*. You may remember that we had got to the end of chap 10. If you have your Bibles open on page 1209, you might care to look over to the left-hand page to 10.19. There you will see that seemingly unimportant word 'therefore'. That word is actually the hinge of the thirteen chapters of this long letter. Everything from v19 onwards is practical. Because of everything that has been said and argued from 1.1 right up to 10.19, all these practical consequences for us Christians follow. Because Jesus is superior to angels, to Moses, to the priests, to Melchizedek; because Jesus's sacrifice of himself on the Cross far outdoes the daily sacrifices of the Temple, we can *therefore* approach God with confidence, knowing our sins are forgiven, our past is wiped out, our future is bright and assured. In other words, *because* of who Jesus is and what he did for us, we can start to live confidently, with our heads up, without fear, and we can start to live for others. That word 'therefore' is, as I say, the hinge of the whole letter.

And also, because of all that Jesus is and what he did on the Cross and at Easter, we can live lives of faith. That is the whole thrust of this chap 11 of *Heb*, which is probably the most famous chapter in the letter. Chap 11 lists all the great men (and women) of the Bible who lived *by faith*. Look at them – Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Rahab, and so it goes on, v32.... These heroes and heroines of the OT lived their lives 'by faith'. This mighty 11th chap of *Heb* is really a commentary on 10.38 where the

prophet Habakkuk is quoted: 'but my righteous one will live *by faith*'. (By the way, that obscure little verse from an obscure little OT prophet is also the 'text' for St Paul's majestic letter to the Romans. We'll do *Romans* another time).

These men and women of the OT lived *by faith*. This was what made them strong and confident and hopeful as they faced each day. I think the root problem with our people today is that they drift through life. There isn't a sense of purpose to most people's living and hope does not seem to be much in evidence these days. There is a nihilism, a nothingness about modern living. Nothing means very much now. You come from nothing and you go to nothing and it all means nothing. It's all rather depressing, isn't it? No wonder people hit the bottle or lose themselves in drugs or smash the place up for a bit of excitement. How very different this is from the people listed in *Heb 11* who lived *by faith*? They weren't richer or more comfortable or more educated than people today. Abraham and Sarah and Moses and Joseph had their fair share of tragedies and hard times, but they lived *by faith*. And it is this 'faith' that I want us to consider these coming weeks.

'Faith' sounds very 'churchy', doesn't it? People say of old Mrs Jones, 'Oh, her faith is very important to her'. It is often said quite condescendingly, almost pityingly, but I want to shew in these next few weeks that everyone, even the hardest atheists use faith. So what do I mean by 'faith'? There is what you might call '*the faith*', which is a body of doctrine, in the sense of, say, 'the *Christian faith*'. I shall pass over that, because we are going to concentrate on 'faith'. And here there are two aspects: faith seen psychologically and faith seen intellectually. Today I would like us to think about faith from a psychological angle; in other words, faith as an *attitude*.

When we are growing up we need faith in our parents, in our teachers. This is faith as *trust*. It is tragic when children look to their parents and teachers, who should be guiding and protecting them, and their trust is betrayed. Some sadly grow up never to regain that trust. Our marriages can work only when we have faith in each other. As our children enter adolescence, it is quite a challenge for parents to slacken off the reins as they also learn to have faith in their offspring. As children become young adults, parents have to give them wings. They have to take the risk to let them make their own mistakes. In other words, parents have to *believe* in their children. They have to have faith in them. And this is why I said earlier that everyone, even the hardest atheist, has faith. The whole of society is based on trust. Employers must trust their employees and employees should be able to trust their employers. Sadly this is dying out in our society. It is precisely because we do *not* trust each other, that we have CCTV cameras everywhere. It is why we have endless inspections. Everyone has to have DBS checks and ID badges. Ours is a society now with very little trust.

This is a terribly sad indictment of our society, and it is crushing us. But we still do need to have faith. And here is the big question: who do we put our faith in? Who do you put *your* faith in? It is not just a matter of 'Who can you *trust*?' but 'Who do you put your faith in for your happiness and welfare?' For centuries people – in our society, at any rate – looked to God for protection and ultimate salvation. The Lord would provide. But in the 18th century, God was dethroned and self was made sovereign. It took a long time for the masses to catch up with the philosophers, but we all now believe that the consumer, (ie, me), the consumer is king. For a few centuries the state took

the place of God. The state would provide. The state would protect us from invasion and provide for the poor and build hospitals and schools. Indeed, we even talked about 'the *welfare* state'. But now more and more people have lost faith in the state. We don't any longer trust our politicians or look up to them. Faith has been lost and this is very dangerous.

So who do we have faith in for our happiness and protection? Well, I keep coming back to God. This Bible is full of promises he made, and so far he has not broken any of them. I know from my own life experience – and I am sure you do also – that so far God has never let me down. There have been some rough times, but then he never promised me (or anyone) an easy life, but he did promise that he would be with me as Immanuel, God-with-us. He also promised that he would be God-*for-us*. There is a lot I do not understand, but when things do not turn out the way I think they should, I have faith that God is working for his glory and for my good, which I can not yet see. I look back in order to see ahead. As I look back on how God has never let me down, I can face the future knowing that he will not not start to fail me, because he does not change. Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and for ever, as we read later in *Heb*. God has not let me down these past sixty-three years. As I enter this new year, why should he let me down now?

And yes, the world is completely barking mad, but I put my faith in God who promised that he is making all things new and that one day, in his good time, there will finally be a new heaven and a new earth. I have no faith in politicians or clergy, for we are part of the problem, but I put my whole trust in God who has never yet broken his promise. God has even started the process of renewal 2,000 years ago on that first Easter Day. Who do you trust?