

Living the Word: Hebrews 11:1-2,8-19

This reading begins a new section of the Letter, praising the faith or the faithfulness of the ancestors of Israel. In this chapter each paragraph begins, 'By faith...'; the Greek puts it with firm and striking emphasis 18 times, and at beginning and end of the chapter (v. 2 and 39): 'it was for this that our ancestors were commended (or attested), or 'it was to this that our ancestors bore witness'. In each of the paragraphs one of the ancestors is praised or is said to have achieved 'righteousness' by acting purely on God's promise. The author works steadily through the figures of the Old Testament, who would of course be heroes to the Hebrew priests, the intended readers of the Letter. Without faith, of course, the Bible makes no sense at all, and this recital of the reliance of the patriarchs on faith is an inspiring testimony of the decision of each one of them across the gamut of biblical history to put their whole trust in the promises of God.

In this series the faith of Abraham duly has pride of place, the first and longest account of historical figures (Abel and Noah are symbolic rather than historical). It was Abraham who received the call to leave his comfortable homeland and go out into the unknown, with only the promise to sustain him and Sarah. This was the beginning of the story which issued in Jesus. Paul also has an important chapter (Romans 4) in which he meditates on Abraham's faith which made him righteous; for Paul too Abraham's faith is the model of all faith.

Abraham's preparedness to sacrifice his son Isaac is a morally difficult point, to which various solutions have been given. Some have held that it is a story to teach that child-sacrifice, practised widely in the surrounding cultures, is not acceptable. Others maintain that Abraham's confidence in God was such that he was confident that God would somehow provide a solution which would save the child. However, this Letter puts forward a different solution, that it was a 'parable' (that is the word used in the Greek text) of the resurrection from the dead, a cause of great joy to Abraham, prefiguring our own joy in the resurrection of Jesus, a resurrection for all humankind.

7th August 2022

Eighth Sunday after Trinity

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time



There is an urgency to Jesus' teaching in today's Gospel. The Lord uses an outrageous image to describe his return, his second coming, as if he were a thief in the night, against whom the householder would guard his house if only he knew. It is a reminder, first of all, that Christians are to be watchful for the signs of God, but also that when Christ does return, that everything will be turned upside down; it is Christ and his Kingdom that endures, and not this world with its compromises and imperfections.

Yet the Gospel begins with words of hope, and of encouragement, Do not be afraid. Jesus describes his disciples as the little flock, and we should see ourselves in this light, remembering our spiritual littleness, that we are children of the heavenly Father. We are to be dressed for action, or, as older translations happily phrased it, to have our loins girded, that is, ensuring that your robes are pulled up and fastened that you can move with haste. When the cares of the world, of this life and its worries drag us down, we are reminded that this life is not the end of the story. Time rolls on, and thoughts of Christ's return seem less urgent, yet the Gospel promises a rich reward for those who endure, watchful, trustful and confident in the promises of Christ.

Today's Gospel: St. Luke 12: 32-48