

**Sermon for 8<sup>th</sup> March 2009**  
**Faith in God - Take Up Your Cross**  
**Rom 4:13-25 and Mark 8:29-38**

As we grow up, we learn a lot about the world. Some of it we learn by being taught: we learn that the Battle of Hastings was in 1066; we learn that sound travels at about 760mph and that light travels at 670 million mph, which is why you always see the lightning before you hear the thunder. That's all what you might call 'head learning' – facts and information. But the lessons we learn the deepest are the ones where we experience something. I've never tried this, but imagine giving a child a bar of chocolate, followed by their first visit to the dentist, then the next day offer them a choice: another bar of chocolate or a second visit to the dentist. I wonder how many would choose the dentist? Some things get learned fast and stay learned!

Our lives are a huge collection of experiences, many of them burn deep into our consciousness. These experiences shape our lives: we want to repeat the pleasurable ones as often as we can, and avoid the unpleasant experiences completely if possible. Our expectations of the future are heavily influenced by what we have experienced in the past.

Our readings this morning, each in their own way, speak of how our worldly experience can limit our faith in God, if we're not careful.

When Abraham was 99 and his wife Sarah was 90, God told them they would have a baby. To begin with Abraham laughed (Gen 17:17), for Abraham's experience told him that two people in their 90s don't have babies – it was ridiculous! Abraham nearly allowed his past experience to influence his expectation of the future. But he had faith in God and, as our reading says, Abraham 'grew strong in his faith ... being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.'

In our Gospel reading Jesus tells his disciples that he would suffer, be rejected by the religious authorities, be killed and rise again. But Peter is outraged, he cannot accept it, and his rejection of this prediction prompts Jesus' famous retort 'Get behind me Satan!'

Peter acknowledged that Jesus is the Messiah, but Peter had certain ideas about the Messiah based on his own experience. He would have seen a few false Messiahs in his time and he knew they all got crucified. A real Messiah would not be rejected by the religious authorities and certainly would not be killed. So when Jesus foretells what will happen to him, Peter cannot accept it. He allowed his past experience and knowledge to prevent him from believing what Jesus was saying – he didn't take into account the God Factor. And Jesus' reply is harsh because he can see the hand of Satan behind Peter's words.

When God has a hand in things, there is no limit to the outcome, but for this to happen we must (as Jesus says) set our minds on divine things, not human things. But like Peter, we too can

allow ourselves to be limited by our worldly experiences from the past, often experiences tainted with pain and disappointment. And as I am discovering, the older you get, the more of those experiences you collect!

Trusting God is difficult. There's a long history of people having difficulty trusting God: Moses asked for God to send someone else because he could not speak very well; Gideon asked for a sign – and then another sign, just to be sure; Jonah tried to run away. But Peter, Moses, Gideon and Jonah, were ordinary people with strengths and weaknesses just like you and I. But each of them let God in, so God could get to work on them. Peter became the rock on which Jesus built his church; Moses a great prophet; Gideon won a great battle despite being heavily outnumbered and Jonah saved the city of Ninevah.

I hope you can see the importance of allowing for the God Factor; to let God into our lives; to keep our minds on divine things, not human things. But how might you do that? Our Gospel reading verse 34 gives some clues: deny yourself; take up your cross; follow me.

First, deny yourself. Take some time out to explore your own experiences. Try to spot where God has (and has not) been working in your life. If you've never done it, write down your faith journey (and if you haven't done it recently, write it down again, you'd be surprised how something new comes up). Look back and see where your journey has taken you. Who were the key people who helped you grow in faith? What were the significant times? Ask yourself what was it about those people and those times that made them significant?

Then, keep talking and listening to God. So pray and read the bible, every day, even just a little. If you haven't done so already, perhaps you might use the Lent course notes.

Second, take up your cross. God has work for all of us to do, we need to find out what it is. Ask yourself what are the issues that get you excited, passionate, or even angry about? In my experience these things are often close at hand because God has already put you there for that reason. They are not always huge tasks, but situations where there is need, injustice or suffering of some kind. In fact your 'work' may not be what you think of as work at all – we were talking about this at the Lent Group on Wednesday – there is a tremendous ministry of 'being', which you can exercise by taking your Christian presence into a place, and letting it 'rub off' onto others who you meet, or who watch you. Seek out those things where you and God together can make a difference with the gifts God has given you.

Third, follow Jesus. Try to think how Jesus would think if He were in your shoes. Expect the unexpected. Don't expect it to be easy!

I'd like to finish by sharing a few observations I've made as I have journeyed on this way for some years now. No two faith journeys are the same, but perhaps you may recognise some similarities and differences with your own journey.

I started going to church when I was six years old. By the time I'd reached my 20s I had done a lot of singing, a lot of bellringing and listened to an awful lot of sermons. I'd got very good at church-going, I was ever so nice, but I was useless as a Christian. And then over the next 10-15 years, things changed. I began to actively use Christian values to make decisions and at that point, things started to change significantly. Many of you will know that I'm training to be a licensed lay minister in the church, but at least half of my work for God goes on at my 'day job' as it were. I'm convinced God has put me there for a reason: to use such influence as I have to bring something of God's values, something of God's kingdom into a hard-nosed commercial world. It's not glamorous, involves long hours, has the potential to be career-limiting, is far from perfect, but often quite fulfilling and is nothing like what I expected to be doing 10 or even 5 years ago.

So, as you progress onwards on your faith journey, remember that anything is possible with God, so keep striving for the things of God and recognise the things of the world for what they are. And take a leaf out of Abraham's book: though you may laugh at the ridiculous plans God might have for you, remember that God will do them, but only if you let him.

Amen

(1,300 words)