

## **Eighth Sunday after Trinity**

**Sunday 7 August 2022**

Worcester Cathedral

The morning of my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, the very first email I opened invited me to take out a life insurance policy for older people. I smiled and deleted it. I now get an invitation to apply for an older person's life insurance policy every other day. But I am not old, I am middle aged, and – according to one official definition - I am right in the middle of middle age. I have 10 years to go before I am old.

If 50 is the new 40, then 70 or 80 must be the new 50 and so on. How perceptions have changed: if you watch some of the more sedate programmes on tv, we are bombarded with adverts for the older person – many of which show people smiling, having fun, holidaying and gadding about with spritely youthfulness. Old age is now celebrated and exciting.

How far we have come when we compare the energy of our modern senior citizens with the writer of the letter to the Hebrews who described Abraham as 'too old' and 'as good as dead'. Abraham was 100, and Sarah 90 when they learned they would have a child, and nobody was more surprised than they were. But even if they felt old – and no doubt tired and probably scared at the prospect of being parents – I doubt they would have appreciated being described (as we hear in today's epistle) that they were 'as good as dead'. The Ethiopic version goes further: saying that Abraham and Sarah's bodies '*were like a dead carcass*'.

The thrust of our three readings today is forward – each reading is about hope and the fulfilment of God's promise. Hope which is sometimes beyond reasoning, but hope which is fulfilled nevertheless. And as if to emphasise the total and complete fulfilment of hope, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews chooses extreme words which cause us first to laugh or smile, and secondly to come to the realisation that even in the seemingly hopeless case of these two extremely old people, nothing but nothing is beyond the power of the God who is faithful.

We have hope because God is faithful. We have faith because the God of hope fills us with all joy and peace in believing: '*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*'

Abraham had faith and hope which is why, despite his age, he trusted God's plan and the hyperbole – this reference to being as good as dead – reminds us that Abraham knew that he was fulfilling God's purpose even though he himself would

not see that realised in his own lifetime. As the author of Hebrews continues, '*All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.*'

Abraham and Sarah keep their eyes fixed on the city that is to come, the sweet and blessed country. They look to the future, a future filled with promise and radiance of glory, with light beyond compare. They look to the future, not to the past. And for those of us who are getting older and are tempted when frustrated by the present to look back, with longing to the past, it is good for us to be reminded that our journey is to the future, our eyes are fixed forward *with* hope and *in* faith.

The call for us as Christians is always a call to the future because it is a call from God, the God who will make all things new; the God who in the fullness of time, will call us all home to that eternal city, the new Jerusalem, well there will be neither sorrow nor pain, but life everlasting. This is the vision for the Christian, the vision of the Church, not because of any foolish dream, but because it is the promise of God. And it is the hope which calls us to act in the world to bring justice and healing, to build a world which is better and brighter: better, because it is shaped by the Kingdom, and brighter because of the light of the Gospel.

Christians must always look to the future: as the writer to the Hebrews says, '*But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one*'. But we do so by living more fully in the present; having this hope for the future does not take us out of the present. We would be foolish to live only for the future as if the present does not matter. The French Jesuit priest, Jean Pierre de Caussade is considered to be the author of the great work on the sacrament of the present moment: the gift of the now, the gift of abandonment to the will of God without anxiety for the future.

Such abandonment does not exclude the future, rather it places such hope and certainty in God's perfect future for humanity that it frees us up to live in the present with all attentiveness and peace. We see it in the lives of Abraham and Sarah, celebrated in the letter to the Hebrews, and presented to us as a pattern of living with which Jesus reassures his disciples both then and now, '*Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom*'.

So we live in the present but with our eyes fixed on the future. How might we creatively manage this tension? How are we to find deep joy in today – with all its troubles and challenges - whilst also looking to the future fulfilment of all that God promises?

For many people the future is worrying – we are living in an age of deep anxiety: the climate emergency is such that time is running out very quickly and we face consequences which are unthinkable. And more immediate, and no less pressing, are the anxieties brought about by the rising cost of living and the fearful future faced by many in this country. These are real worries and anxieties and they are not to be dismissed. They are certainly not to be ignored by simply living in the present moment. The present moment is deeply uncomfortable for many people. So how do we look to the future with hope and confidence?

In today's gospel we join Jesus's teaching a few verses after he has told his hearers not to worry, but such a call does not negate our obligation to strive for the future. Jesus clearly tells us to strive for the kingdom of heaven – a kingdom of love, compassion, justice and freedom. Worry is replaced by hope. Anxiety replaced by action. *'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom'*. This Kingdom is our treasure and it is promised to us in order that, confident in its coming, we might work to bring it to reality in the present. Jesus tells us that the Kingdom is ours, therefore we must treasure it, *'for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also'*.

And that, for me, is the key to living in the present with our hope fixed on the future. It is summarised in treasuring that which matters. It is to be so sure of God's promise that we leave no stone unturned in seeking the kingdom: campaigning against poverty rather than allowing anxiety to overshadow lives; to fight the climate emergency in lobbying for significant and urgent change; to challenge indifference and discrimination so that nobody is considered 'as good as dead'. Treasuring the people of God in the present moment as a promise of that which is to come.

Faith is not merely a panacea, it is not a tool to numb our present. Faith is not a pipe-dream for the future which bears no weight on the present. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Conviction is so much easier if we treasure that which we have conviction in. Faith is our call to action so hear the call of Christ, *'Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit. Be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, ... he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them'*.

Stephen Edwards