

## Address by Ian Cartwright for 7th August 2022

“Great is the Mystery of Faith”

These are words we will hear later in this service and to which I shall be returning later in the course of this sermon but, first, I want to ask you if anyone here knows the meaning of the jargon word “twofer” as this is, I contend, relevant to our Gospel reading this morning. Can anyone help with the meaning of “twofer”?

Well, it is marketing speak and means “2 for the price of one” and this is what our Gospel reading contains since the first 3 verses are the conclusion of a lengthy discourse about our attitude to money and God’s provision including the parable of the foolish rich man on which subject Bill preached and rapped to us so eloquently and so memorably last Sunday. I hope that you did not miss this unique presentation. The final 6 verses of the Gospel are the start of a discourse about the second coming of Jesus which we celebrate in our response to “Great is the Mystery of Faith” when we affirm our faith with the words “Christ will come again”.

However, I cannot miss this rare opportunity to preach a sermon based on a very occasional reading from the Letter to the Hebrews and its reference to characters from the Old Testament. We celebrate in our worship the lives of so many saints from the New Testament and after but when we restrict ourselves, very understandably, to one reading before the Gospel, there is less chance to include a reading from the Old Testament.

The writer of the Letter of Hebrews about whom we seem to know so little despite much research on the subject starts the 11th. Chapter of the Letter with the words:-

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”

To which we could respond with the words “Great is the Mystery of Faith”

However, rather than go into a lengthy discourse to explain what is meant by faith - as Paul could well have done - the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews uses examples from the lives of characters from the Old Testament to provide teaching as to the meaning of faith. All told, he names 15 different individuals mostly introduced by the words “by faith” .

By far, the lengthiest passages in this chapter describe the lives of Abraham and Moses. Both Abraham and Moses are given 4 separate “by faith” events

in their lives. However, today's first reading refers solely to Abraham although in previous lectionaries an extra verse was included to describe how Noah acted "by faith" in building his arc when there was absolutely no sign of rain. There was nothing to tell Noah of the impending catastrophe except the warning from God yet he built the arc to save his household. His obedience to God is an outstanding example of faith about the unseen future. "Great is the Mystery of Faith"

Now, let us return to Abraham where 3 of his 4 "by faith" illustrations are contained in our first reading. The first of these is very similar to the experience of Noah as it concerns Abraham's willingness to leave the security of his home at the call of God to go to another land destined for himself and his heirs. He had nothing but the promise of God to rely on yet he acted as if the promise was already fulfilled and Canaan already in his possession. "Great is the Mystery of Faith"

Then, again "by faith" he was willing to live in tents to show the temporary and unsettled way of life in this world while looking forward, as we do, to the city that has firm foundations - the heavenly Jerusalem. "Great is the Mystery of Faith"

Thirdly, "by faith" there was his acceptance of the promise that his wife, Sarah, would bear children despite being barren and past the age when conception was possible in normal circumstances. This promise was fulfilled in the birth of Isaac. "Great is the Mystery of Faith"

In all these examples, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews sums up the effect that faith had on the forward looking outlook of Noah and Abraham. They did not look back to memories of the past but, rather, looked forward to the fulfilment of God's promises. They trusted in God's promises for the future and acted in ways that anticipated such an unknown future as compared with the known past and present.

Alongside all this teaching about faith, it is, perhaps, useful to remind ourselves of the humanity of some of these 15 individuals who are named in this chapter. They were role models as far as faith is concerned but in other ways they were just like us with their failings and weaknesses. For example, Abraham twice failed to identify himself as Sarah's husband to save himself from certain danger first when Pharaoh took her into his own house and similarly when the same happened with King Abimelech. Abraham passed Sarah off as his sister rather than his wife on both occasions. Also, Abraham took Sarah's slave-girl, Hagar, as a wife who bore him a son named Ishmael.

In this same chapter we read about how Rahab, the prostitute, acted “by faith” and there is mention of Samson and David whose lust for Delilah and Bathsheba respectively had serious repercussions.

However, this is by way of encouragement for it shows that, even with all our human weaknesses and frailties, our human condition, it is still possible to live “by faith”.

But whose example of faith might inspire us? We could look to Old Testament individuals like Job or Daniel who are not mentioned in this chapter. Then there are the Apostles and especially Thomas who doubted yet, like Peter, made a positive declaration of faith. How about St. Paul who looked forward “by faith” to Christ’s return or, perhaps, a saint like St. Francis of Assisi who “by faith” renounced his family’s wealth as he looked forward to relying upon God’s provision? More recently, someone like Mother Teresa or our own Jemima who has just left for South America looking forward to but not knowing what she might offer and receive during her time there.

However, all this makes me think that I have wrongly decided to ignore our “two for the price of one” Gospel reading. Surely, both elements are about the faith - the looking forward - we profess. First, Jesus’s preaching about money and God’s gifts for us means that, “by faith” we must look forward to and rely on God’s generous provision for us. Again, the teaching about the second coming of Christ means that “by faith” we must look forward to and prepare for His return.

“Great is the Mystery of Faith”. “Christ WILL come again”