

TRINITY 7 Yr C

It's one of those questions, isn't it? You have 15 minutes to get something you value from your house before you have to leave it all behind.

What do you take?

That may seem like a theoretical question to us, but it was, of course, a very real and pressing one for those who were living in Whaley Bridge and were told to leave in case the huge dam above the town should burst and overwhelm them.

Apparently someone from there was seen removing a print of Peter Breugel's *The Peasant Wedding*'. For that person, we must assume, that particular picture meant something very significant and sustaining: life would have less savour, less meaning, perhaps, would be somehow impoverished by the absence of that work of medieval art. An interesting and in some ways revealing choice, speaking as it does of valuing something more spiritual than practical, something which in one sense is no use at all if you've lost your home, but which is nonetheless deemed to be indispensable to the inner life.

So what would you take and why? You might like to turn to your neighbour for a moment and if you will, share your thoughts with them.

I don't know if you've read *The Salt Path* by Raynor Wynn but I can certainly recommend it. It's described by a *Sunday Times* critic on the cover as 'A Tale of triumph: of hope over despair; of love over everything.' It's an account of what happens to a middle-aged couple who lose their home in a court case and the day after receiving the devastating decision visit the consultant about the husband's test results only to have an inexorable wasting disease confirmed. A double whammy if ever there was one.

What would they do? Where would they go?
What would they take with them?

The book is the engaging story of their walk over several months around the SW Coast Path - the Salt Path of the title. For that's what they decided to do. They bought a tent, a pair of sleeping bags, some clothes, waterproofs and food, little else, and set off.

It's a story of reorientation of losing life but finding it again through the path itself, in the walk through the natural world, through facing the elements and through the people they meet and the kindness they encounter.

'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is there will your heart be also.'

Do you remember - some of you will - many years ago now there was a terrible channel ferry disaster as a Townsend Thoresen ferry left Zeebrugge on a calm evening, only to begin to sink as water poured in through the ferry's bow doors, left open to ventilate the car deck.

At the memorial service for the many who lost their lives in that terrible accident the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, said, 'Faith is not hoping the worst won't happen. It's knowing there is no tragedy that cannot be redeemed.'

Faith, the Hebrew letter tells us, is ‘the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Christian faith is about placing your trust in Jesus Christ, whose execution and early death seemed a disaster to his friends and family, but whose resurrection is the basis of the kind of faith that Runcie spoke of.

And indeed it is often at the difficult times, when things go badly wrong, when there is a heart-churning diagnosis, when loved ones suffer undeservedly, when dreams turn to ashes, when the rug is pulled from under you and you seem to fall with nothing to catch hold of, that faith is most severely tested. And we all experience them.

But it’s also about those times when life opens out, often when you’re young, and all things seem possible that faith can play a vital role in deciding what turn that life will take, what judgment will lie beneath the many decisions, large and small, that make up any human life.

For what you believe about life and about yourself will always affect what you do, whether it’s religious faith or its absence, or whether it’s political adherence, or even indifference.

It makes a difference whether you're for or against Brexit, whether you're an Islamist or a Buddhist, an atheist or a Hindu. Belief has consequences.

That's the place we find Abram in today in that reading from Genesis, wondering about his future, wondering what life will hold for him and his descendants.

He speaks to God out of faith. He entrusts God with his deepest desires and God responds with a promise. But Abram will have to trust the promise he's been given. He will have to act on it before it materialises. But it is as he acts, in faith, as the Hebrew letter tells us, that he demonstrates his trust in the promise he's heard as he sets off for a foreign land and finds the promise of a descendant fulfilled in the birth of Isaac, meaning laughter, God's little joke of new life for a couple past normal child-bearing.

Our Christian faith is not based on nothing. It's based on our own experience of how faith sustains us personally, and it also comes through learning about other stories of faith -

other people we have met or whom we hear about, the stories of men and women of faith in the past and above all through that prime story of faith that is the account of humanity's response to God that we find in the scriptures.

We cannot expect or hope to sustain our faith without them and in particular the good news we hear in the Gospel. When the gospel procession takes place we all turn to face it and we stand in reverence to listen to the story and the words of Jesus Christ. We surround it with light because it brings light, we acclaim it with music because it is a cause for praise and we make the sign of the cross because it is through the cross that the Good News comes.

It is as though in the reading Jesus is really present in our midst, speaking to us here and now for the firmer foundation of our faith. We are not turning to a book, but to him, the pioneer and a perfecter of faith.

And that continues in the Eucharist, when he is present in the narrative of what happened on that last night he spent at table with his friends and the gift of bread and wine he leaves for us to remember him by. In the very act of remembrance he becomes present our midst.

And so we share the meal with one another as Jesus invites us to join him in his supper. And in doing that we become once again his brothers and sisters, his family, the community of faith, sustaining and upholding each other, week by week, practically, actually, really. In that sense the Eucharist makes the Church.

These are the things that sustain our faith as Christians, our faith in the one who gives life in all its fullness. And it's this faith that sustains all our hope in life, gives it savour, imparts its meaning, gives our lives shape and purpose. It's faith that reveals the bigger picture which takes us out of ourselves and moves us towards others and an engagement with them and the world around us. It helps us see our lives in the light of eternity.

What would I take from the house, then? I'd take a Kindle, because in it I would find the Bible, I'd find the prayers of the community of faith and I'd find novels and stories and biographies of other people to remind me of the richness of human life and the gift that it is to all of us who possess it.

Faith opens us to God who keeps his promises and who is to be trusted in all the stages and seasons of our life. Faith opens us up to all that life may bring, knowing that with Jesus Christ at our side we can overcome all things and come to him at the last when we shall no longer need faith because then we shall see him as he truly is, whom to see is to love and whom to love is the fulfilment of all we can desire.

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.