

Genesis 17.1-7,15-16; Romans 4.13-25; Mark 8.31-38

A long and devastating drought had afflicted the village, and people had become desperate. Food became scarce and what little there was, was very expensive. The elders gathered and discussed the problem. After a lot of complaining with very little in the way of ideas, a man stood up and said that he had heard of a holy man who was able to make it rain.

“We’re desperate enough to try anything,” the headman said. “Summon the holy man and let’s give it a try.”

Messages were sent, and at the next meeting of the council, the man reported that the holy man was willing to come, but had one requirement.

“He said that God will only comply with our request if someone from this village has faith in Him. He cannot do it alone,”

“Tell him we are all people of faith here. Let him come,” the headman said.

The following day a small man with a large bundle on his back appeared in the village. He asked that everyone assemble in the square to beseech God for rain.

The crowds began to gather, and by late afternoon everyone was there. Farmers had left their dry fields, wives had left their bare kitchens and even the children

had stopped playing their games. The holy man stood in the center of the square and looked carefully at everyone. He walked through the masses, apparently looking for something among them. After scrutinizing everyone, he stood on a box and addressed the crowd. “I have come under the belief that this village was populated by people of faith. I see that it is not true, however, and so it is pointless to ask God for rain.” He turned and walked away from the stunned assembly, still carrying his bulky burden.

The headman hurried after him and caught his arm. “Master,” he said, “Why have you decided we are not people of faith?”

The holy man kept walking. Over his shoulder he said, “No one brought an umbrella.”

*By Art Lester (99 tales to set your inner clock by)*

Faith is a strange thing. Faith is believing in something that seems improbable. And honestly, the Christian faith is built on a whole pile of strange and improbable things.

When we say the Creed together, we are declaring our belief in what many people see as illogical, unrealistic, deluded ideas. A man who was God? A man who rose from the dead? A baby born to a virgin? The idea of a God who created everything and loves us? It’s almost

as crazy as taking an umbrella with you when there isn't a cloud in the sky and the weather forecast is for a perfect 90 degree day of sunshine. Honestly, who would do such a thing? What kind of faith would that require?...

Faith is a strange thing. The writer of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament explains that "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." Being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see.

Abraham (or Abram) is the perfect example of this. God tells him something that seems absurd - that he and his elderly wife will have a son together, despite their old age, and Abraham believes it. He has an active hope that allows him to believe the impossible, and it is this, this hope and faith in the face of improbability, that is credited to him as righteousness.

This is why Abraham is the father of nations - not because he was particularly holy (in fact he makes plenty of mistakes), or because he was especially wise or powerful (he wasn't), but because he was righteous in his faith. He was sure of what he hoped for, and certain of what he could not see. Abraham had a living trust in God's promise - he believed God, and thus he

was righteous. If Abraham had been told that if he prayed for rain it would happen, I think he would have taken an umbrella!

But there is a problem. The difficulty is that faith is really hard. It's actually quite tricky to truly be sure of what you hope for, and even harder to be certain of what you can't see. There's a reason many (or perhaps even all) of us struggle with doubt sometimes. Sometimes all that can be held onto is a belief that there is a God, or even that we think we believe there's a God... Like the father of the sick boy in Mark's gospel who cries out, "I believe, help me in my unbelief!", at times that's pretty much all we can say.

There are, of course, people who are inspirations, those who have a faith burning so bright it seems incredible. At seminary you learn about many theologians and saints who have had insights and arguments, who taught and wrote, and fought and died, and gave everything for particular beliefs or points of view. Again going back to the Creed, this declaration of Christian faith was the culmination of vast amounts of debate and argument, extraditions and exiles, and even death. People have been passionate about what our faith is for millennia.

And yet, there is also space for asking questions. There are, after all, many devoted Christians who would passionately disagree with each other over various aspects of faith. There's a reason there are so many christian denominations (over 200 just in the USA, and many thousands more across the world). It is possible for faith to go hand in hand with flexibility, with a curious mind and openness to exploration.

So can we be faithful in the face of this richness of thought and belief? How can we be faithful even when it's hard, when all we can do is cry out 'I believe, help me in my unbelief'? I think Abraham shows us how. It's in embodying it in how we live. It's in carrying our umbrellas when we pray for rain. To live the Christian life is to live in anticipation of God's promises being fulfilled.

It's in daring to hope against hope for a better future, for a world where every person might know they are valued and loved, for a country and city filled with people putting God at the centre of everything. To be faithful is to do what we can to make these changes happen. To be faithful is to do all the things we can, however small, to be Christ in the world, because this will be credited to us as righteousness.

So what is it that you hope for? This Lent, may we all dare to hope against hope, to believe in things that might even seem impossible. Our umbrellas are our prayers, our acts of kindness, our pursuit of justice, our daily choices to follow Christ, even when the path leads to the cross. So when we pray for rain – for healing, for peace, for kindness, for integrity and joy – let's live actively in expectant hope of God's faithfulness.

Amen.