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Isaiah 1:1, 10 - 20

Psalms 50

Hebrews 11:1 – 3, 8 - 16

Luke 12:32 - 40

**Living in the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen.**

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In Pilgrim's Progress John Bunyan's last view of Christian and his companion Hopeful, is of them entering the city of God. As the gates shut behind them Bunyan catches a glimpse of the city shining like the sun, and sees a throng of winged and crowned figures. As the vision fades, Bunyan wakes from a sleep and says, "... *when I had seen, I wished myself among them.*"

The longing for the city whose architect and builder is God is central to the faith stories found in Chapter 11 of Hebrews and is one reason those mentioned accepted a life of pilgrimage. After giving a definition of faith, the letter to the Hebrews rhythmically marches through a chronicle of the names and deeds of heroes and heroines from days gone by who lived in such faith. If we read them all we would not only be late for lunch, the sanctuary would be filled with stories of the faithful courage of prophets, patriarchs and saints. As the narrative progresses, the pace quickens, the temperature rises and we are summoned to join the march, to embrace the cross of Jesus, and with faith and hope resolutely seek the city of God.

"*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*"(11:1). Theologians point out this definition of faith does not do justice to the full meaning of the biblical concept. But the author settles for naming the aspects of faith he is trying to encourage. "*Assurance of things hoped for*" tells us that inwardly people of faith have confidence that the promises of God for a better country, a domain of peace, justice, mercy and salvation can be trusted. But there is more to it. The word translated "assurance" ("*hypostasis*"), is used earlier in Hebrews to describe how the Son is the material expression of God's very being. This takes us beyond the idea of a merely inward hope. It means the reality of God's promise to put down every power to hurt or destroy is already being translated into physical reality in lives lived facing God's gift of a new future. Such faith has not remained inward, but has worked its way out into acts of love and justice. It joins the march for peace because it is in receipt of the first instalment of the peace that passes all understanding.

Hebrews also says "*faith is the conviction of things not seen*". Paul says: "what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal." To the eye of faith the universe is not a haphazard swirl of energy and matter, but a *creation* – an expression of a hidden providence that works for our life and good. To the naked eye the world is a place of suffering, setback and hardship. But the eye of faith perceives another reality emerging within it, born of grace, and mysteriously made clear in Jesus Christ. His suffering is the sign of a new embrace, which gathers us into a new creation.

Hebrews recalls how Abraham and Sarah left home to journey towards a surprising

new inheritance promised them by God. Their journey was not one of empty wandering. It was based on a promised outcome: life in a new community whose architect and builder is God. Abraham and Sarah moved forward, drawn by a vision for the future, their own and others. Their journey was - towards God. They had no guarantee of when or where the fulfilment would come but were able to make this journey in hope and trust because what they were seeking was, in some way, already in their hands. In coming to know the *promise* of God, they had come to know *God* - and in life there is nothing you can have which is richer than that.

Hebrews uses Abraham and Sarah to testify to what it looks like when people live by being sure of what you hope for. They model what it means to live according to the conviction of things not seen. It sounds simple, but it led to the complete reshaping of their lives. No longer settled comfortably at home doing predictable things, Abraham and Sarah became aliens and pioneers of a new tradition. While they did not know where they were going, their destiny in God was never in doubt. They were not tourists. Their lives suddenly began to go somewhere – but not in a direction they chose. This did not mean there would be nothing on the way to tempt or frighten them. Their courage came from knowing their story was linked into a much bigger story. It came from knowing that, underlying the normal contours of life, there are realities, not part of our normal view, which have the power to affect the way we look at life and the actions we take. Even though they were unable to complete the journey, what they did create something, which has changed the lives of many.

Is this just the tale of unfinished business? No, it is the tale of God who sent another pilgrim into the valley of human suffering where Abraham and all who travelled with him and Sarah were perishing. The new pioneer was not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters. He was like us in every respect and in him God accompanied us in our life. His trustful dependence on God allowed him to go so far as to suffer in his goal of gathering up to God, as a hen gathers her chickens, all who longed for fullness of life in the city where God is all in all. In terms of the Gospel for today, his gift to us was the Kingdom. He made the reign of God ours, so that we may live according to its vision, and no longer be bound by the limits of this world's vision for life. That is why his followers are free from earthly constraints about wealth, position and power.

To look forward to the city where our deepest dreams come true is not escapist fantasy, pursued by Christians who find the present world uncongenial. The longing for somewhere where justice is done, where joy lasts, beauty does not fade and peace reigns is a hunger of the human heart. The Revelation of St John may show this city coming down from heaven, but the writer to the Hebrews sees this city as something to be sought on earth – “*your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*” applies here.

One of the world's leading management thinkers has said: “There is an eager market for what pleases and reassures. [As church] this is not primarily our business, in fact talk about [giving up our riches and] having nowhere to lay our head is destabilizing, rather than reassuring. Our core business as church is not to invite people to a journey of self-discovery, but a pilgrimage of service, based on a vision of the hope and meaning we have been given. We are not here to create an organization, or a voluntary association, but a community of hope and meaning, [and to become] a pilot project for such a way of life.”

A community of hope and meaning is another way to describe the church, built on the basis of a vision, glimpsed from afar. By modern standards that makes us an eccentric community. But that is the risk we take if we aim to live in *the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen*.