

Pentecost 14
21/8/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Galatians 3:6-14
Psalm 71
Luke 13:10-17

Abraham's faith in Christ

“Abraham believed”. At that point – after the second word – we need to pause because the word “believe” can cause our minds to run in all sorts of directions. “I believe” can be a statement of an opinion levered off certain observations I’ve made. “I believe that North Melbourne will win the premiership”; “I believe that gay marriage will be legalised”; “I believe that Donald Trump will be president” (some such beliefs being scarier than others, obviously!).

The *concept* of belief (rather than just belief as the result of the yet unproven calculation) brings other sets of associations: faith is set over against reason, with reason being the thing that we *know*, the thing that we agree to hold in common, as distinct from faith which has become a much more personalised and private thing. And of course we have, in our contemporary context, the contrary way in which belief has reasserted itself in the last 10 or 20 years as a major political consideration, and this after we in the liberal west thought that faith and belief had been safely marginalised to people’s hearts and minds, away from the public sphere.

So when we hear the Abraham “believed”, there are lots of things we might imagine being said.

When *Paul* talks about belief he relates it very much the person of Jesus Christ. He talks about being saved by believing in Christ. [As Bruce explained](#) for us a couple of months ago, this is more than just my generating within myself a subjective feeling of trust. It has to do with Christ’s own faithfulness is well, something which is outside of our individual convictions: I believe in Christ’s own believing. But Paul also talks about belief as being something more akin to *participation*. To believe in Christ is to participate in Christ himself. So Paul can speak of his belief as his having been crucified with Christ, and now having Christ living within him.

But then we come, a few verses later, to “Abraham believed God”. It is very easy here to forget what Paul has just said about what belief actually is – to cut Christ out of the picture and to drop back into a dynamic of Abraham believing (in a generic way) in God. But Paul is very consistent. When he says that Abraham believed God, he is basically saying that Abraham believed in *Christ*: *Abraham* was crucified with Christ and now lives by Christ living in him.

This, of course, makes no sense so far as chronological history goes. Abraham predates Paul by perhaps 1500 or 1600 years. How can Abraham believed in was not actually happened? What Paul is doing here is saying that the whole of God’s dealings with Israel are to be read through God’s engagement with the world in *Christ*. Christ is a kind of lens through which we can see what faith or faithfulness is, before and after the cross.

Now, that is all very interesting (I hope!). But it doesn't yet have very much traction with the "real" world. It doesn't give us a sense of what it might *mean* for Abraham to believe. To get this sense, we have to read the whole verse: "Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness".

"Righteousness" is our next focal point. This is again, like belief, a religious-sounding word which we don't use very often in the secular sphere except the expression "self-righteousness", which is often an accusation directed at the religious anyway. It feels *like* a religious word. But for the scriptures it is a legal and political word. It has to do with being set right, being justified, being lined up according to some criteria or standard. So it is important to recognise that there are "righteousnesses" all over the place, sets of rules according to which we are expected to perform.

There are economic orthodoxies. It doesn't matter whether you're a free-market capitalist or a state-controlled market Communist, each orthodoxy has its set of rules according to which we are expected to line ourselves up. There are social and political orthodoxies everywhere. Patriarchy is one of these, which sets men and women in the right place. To be righteous in such a context is to be in your right place and to be happy with that. Ecological orthodoxies dictate about how we should relate to the world around us. Moral orthodoxies concern themselves with what we should or should not do. Each of these come with their own sense of what righteousness is. And we find righteousness in those various orthodoxies by knowing the rules and lining ourselves up according to them. Now we might not ever actually agree precisely on what those rules are. We constantly debate the economic orthodoxies and the moral orthodoxies and so forth. But that doesn't deny the dynamic. In those debates what we are looking for *are* those rules, seeking to establish how I might rightly expect you to relate to me.

What that produces in us is boasting that I know the rules and I am righteous according to them and that you probably aren't and, correspondingly, accusations: that you do not know or comply with the rules and so you are properly set aside or excluded.

On this understanding, righteousness is pretty difficult work. You have to know the rules and be confident that you have yourself covered. It is also, in the end, isolating work. For the harder you press on what the rules ought to be, the more harshly you define how we ought to relate to each other, the more self-righteous you demonstrate yourself to be, and the less righteous others are. The effect is a kind of self-isolation: those who are righteous in this way are lonely.

But to get back to Abraham: as we read the verse "Abraham believed God and was reckoned him as righteousness", it is important to get the emphasis right. The emphasis doesn't really fall upon "righteousness". This is not what Paul is arguing against. Righteousness is the goal which both he and his opponents have in common; the question is, What is the *means* toward that end? So Paul says, "Abraham *believed* God and *it* was reckoned to him as righteousness", and not some other thing.

Now we must recall again that here "belief" is not just a generic religious affection. It has to do with taking on Christ. Abraham let himself be crucified; he allowed his life to come from something other than the impression that he can make upon others or upon God.

Belief becomes, now, a way of negotiating the many orthodoxies swelling around us in the world, each with their own corresponding righteousnesses. Belief is not a way of stepping *out* of the world; it is a way of being *in* the world with its various demands but engaging in a particular kind of way. The one who believes with Paul, and so with

Abraham, the one who is crucified to the world and the world to her or him, this one is freed from the harsh demands of the orthodoxies of nature and society. And, more importantly, the believer is free from the implication that those orthodoxies are themselves God, or that the economics or the politics or the social mores are divinely ordered.

To believe God, as Abraham did, is not to screw up our eyes and posit that there “is” a God, even if unseen. It is not even to do Godly things, in a moral sense. It is to recognise that the gods – the orthodoxies, the righteousnesses which clamour around us – are not God, and bring neither true life nor true freedom. To believe the God who addresses us with the promise of more is to be able to be where we are, and to be complete – right, whole, just – despite the incompleteness of what is going on around us. To believe is to hold that God gives, and does not take, and to grow into an ordering of our words and our actions which declares just that.

By the grace of this giving God, may such belief be held with ever-stronger conviction by each of us, and all God’s people. Amen.
