

'Great is Thy Faithfulness'

God is faithful: we've heard it said; we say it & hopefully believe it, but like so many concepts & ideas regarding our creator, can we really grasp it? & appreciate it? Can we take such a concept & understand it from a human point of view? It is easy to repeat words so often that their grandeur becomes lost, like so many things, in our daily dialogue: we move so fast on to the next thing. We've been told: slow down, smell the roses, turn down the noise, appreciate nature & the people around us, with their talents & wit, & yes, even shortcomings. How & where we do that is unique to each individual. We look for places of solitude; we pray (&/or meditate): but the world is hard to escape from: trying without effort to relax, breathe, and be present with all that is around us, including God & His care, & His word, is not sometimes as easy as we think. A friend confided that he had to do his praying in the morning because he frequently fell asleep if he tried doing it at night! But it's necessary to be a praying people & a praying church, because it means a church that is constantly aware of & in touch with the faithful, caring God, who is always there. A minister friend said, 'if you're too busy to pray, you're too busy': we need that time in God's presence: we need to, as the hymn says: 'speak oft with our Lord'. I saw an illustration, (based on the Bible story of Jesus with Mary & Martha) of Jesus sitting in someone's modern house, in the family room, while everyone in the house, like back then, was running around like crazy, doing all manner of things they thought were essential: coming & going & stressing: when all Jesus wanted was for them to sit down, calm down, & join Him: make Him & the big 'faith' picture, their focus. Our Lord is always there: & He is faithful to His people: Faithful: 'the concept of unfailingly remaining loyal to someone or something, & putting that loyalty into consistent practice, regardless of extenuating circumstances', in our case sin & wandering & doubting. It has been said that Satan's favourite tools are: fear, doubt, guilt, & grudges. In their place, they can be useful tools: a healthy fear of something can keep us alert & safe; a little bit of doubt can keep us humble & not cocky & boastful; some feelings of guilt can help us learn from our mistakes: it's when these things become the focus of our thoughts for days/months/years on end, that they become problematic: **we don't forgive others & ourselves, as God has forgiven us:** (repeat): & grudges are never useful tools!: they just enable the person we have a grudge against to continue controlling our emotions.

God is faithful & doesn't abandon us when we display these things: He doesn't write us off & move on to someone else. He forgives us, wipes the slate clean & sends us out again: 'go & sin no more'.

In Isaiah 49, starting at verse 14, we see a people, not that different from us: the journey out of exile was long & full of challenges & growing pains: God was preparing them for their new life in the promised land: & the longer the journey, the easier it is to lose hope, faith even: we journey on & struggle on & pray on: but when our world seems to remain unchanged: it just becomes exhausting to 'keep the faith' & 'keep the hope', & know that God is there & God is aware of what's going on with each one of the Israelites & us 'Durhamites': listen to it again: the voices of doubt become louder: the strength of faith can weaken: for them & everyone here.

Or take our friend Job: in chapter 23: an eternal voice of frustration: 'Oh, that I knew where I might find Him'... 'I would present my case before Him' 'I would know the words which He would answer me' 'He would take note of me': perhaps the modern & still laughable 'He would know who He's dealing with!' Here is someone at his wits & perhaps his faith's end, looking for strength & courage: looking to take matters in his hand & do something about his daily struggles: 'if God isn't doing anything, I will': again, not necessarily a bad thing, since we were made to do, and learn, and grow & explore: but we were also made to have faith in our creator, who was already faithful to us before any struggles, and still is today. This story goes on for 15 chapters, until God answers Job in chapter 38: 'who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge?': 'where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?' & later, at the end of the book: 'the Lord blessed the latter days of Job, more than his beginning'. God remained faithful to Job, even when he made an absolute fool of himself over many chapters: Job realized (was brought to realize) God's faithfulness, & admitted God's faithfulness: **& God did not hold Job's thoughts & words against him**, but used them as a teachable moment in forgiveness & faithfulness. We are to do likewise. We are to believe & have faith, likewise: no matter how long the journey, because God's love and faithfulness are bigger than our journeys. Focus on God: we've heard it here so many times: focus on God: it is interesting to look at words in scripture: right away patterns can be seen: it is no accident that the most used words in the Bible are: in this order: Lord, God, Father.

In our passage from Matthew 6, Jesus was teaching & giving the tools & advice His disciples (His followers) needed in order to 'not complicate' things when it

came to faith & daily living: He had just taught the Lord's prayer; He taught not to make a hypocritical show out of fasting & giving; now He says: 'do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth': they are not as important as you may think: no one can serve two masters: so decide who & what you are going to serve: decide who & what you will have faith in: the quick to pass and fade things of this world, or the faithful God of our fathers, who created our world out of eternal, unchanging wisdom & love?

& Jesus takes us to the very foundations of daily living to illustrate His point: our Lord says: 'decide who & what you will serve' or 'decide who & what you will pursue & serve': you cannot serve 2 (or more) masters: decide who & what you will commit to: be faithful to: you cannot serve God & mammon: a semitic word for money & riches: decide between the heavenly, faithfulness & wisdom of God: who was, and is, or something else that will not last or satisfy.

Read verses 25-34: don't concern yourself with: food, drink, clothing: pretty important, vital stuff: yet Jesus says: don't concern yourself with these things: life is more important than food: remember the temptation of Jesus 2 chapters back: 'We/I do not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'. Then Jesus talks about the birds & the flowers: God feeds the birds: they don't toil or save: are you not worth more than they? God makes the flowers of the field more beautiful than even King Solomon: & the flowers are here today & gone tomorrow: why would God spend so much time feeding birds & making them & flowers beautiful? Because they too, are part of His creation: they carry elements of their holy creator with them. God loves & is faithful to His creation. Jesus reminds everyone that those who are not as close to God as they should be, worry about these things: but 'God knows what you are going through & what you need'. Seek first God's kingdom: that is: everyday make 'Thy kingdom come' more of a reality.

Our Lord reminds us in the last verse (very important to note) that all we have to seek God & love others, & serve others, is today: the past is done & tomorrow is promised to no one: God was with us & faithful when the past happened; He is with us right now, & will be with us & faithful during whatever future we have: Job told us this & Jesus told us this: & how many times from this pulpit has someone told us this? But being told something many times over many centuries is useless if we don't believe truly in God's love & faithfulness, & live in that thought every day.

God's faithfulness came before our faith. 'Before you were born, I knew you'.

I read a great definition of faith: 'it is not hoping & praying that things will be o.k., but knowing that in God, I am o.k. no matter how things turn out'.

Lord God: Father, Son, Holy Spirit: 'great is Thy faithfulness'. Thanks be to God.
Amen.