

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia  
on Sunday September 16th 2007 by the Reverend Alan Neale  
“What Makes Faith Difficult?”**

“If in doubt, go to America” – with these words Ron Ferguson begins the twenty third chapter of his wonderful biography of George MacLeod, founder of the Iona Community. “If in doubt, go to America”.

It seems that George MacLeod found America to be a place where doubts could be expressed safely without recrimination, without alienation... but also a place where faith could be strengthened and restored.

“If in doubt, go to America”. How wonderful it would be if all people felt similarly about the institution of church, about faith communities. “If in doubt, go to church”... there your hesitations and doubts will be accepted and there, in time, your faith will develop and nurture.

Well, about a month ago I preached on the subject of faith... today I preach about what makes faith difficult? And next week, what makes faith possible?

What makes faith difficult?

Firstly, a bad image, a false image of God makes faith difficult. In Jeremiah chapter 4, the Lord sadly but firmly comments, “My people are foolish, they do not know me; they are stupid children, they have no understanding”. It is inevitable that faith will be difficult when we do not know God as He really is; when we have no understanding (or at least a beginning of an understanding) of His nature. Often when someone says to me that they do not believe in God, or that they have doubts about God... I ask them, “Tell me about that God”. And often, very often, they will describe a God in whom I also do not believe and have no faith... God without mercy and grace, a distant and intransigent God, a God unmoved by tragedy – stoic and without passion... friends, such a God makes faith difficult, very difficult indeed. George MacLeod once wrote, “Idolatry is not essentially the worship of a statue. Idolatry essentially is the worship of a static God... our God is a God that moves”. Idolatry will never provide a living, energizing faith... it makes faith difficult.

Secondly, isolation makes faith difficult. The Gospel for today (taken from Luke 15 – the chapter of lost things... the lost son, the lost sheep, the lost coin), today's Gospel gives us a wonderful insight into the heart and mind of God... every effort is made to find the one that is lost, alone, separated... and all heaven breaks out with joy when that one is found and restored. Friends, restoring the individual is crucial to the heart, the passion of God... feeling alone, being isolated, trying to be a "lone ranger" is not good for the soul... it is not the way things are meant to be and when we privatize our faith and try to "go it alone" we will find faith difficult. Faith is meant to be personal... but never private. Without the conversation of others, the sharing of faith... suddenly what is relatively minor takes on major proportions as we mull it over in isolation.

Thirdly, an unholy lifestyle makes faith difficult. Now this is difficult ground to travel... but it must be done. A life that refuses to seek to change, to become more like Christ, to be more in line with the will and purposes of God... that life will find faith difficult. And let's not become too complicated as we seek God's will for our lives... some things, some divine challenges are blindingly obvious. One wit once said of the Bible, "It's not the things I don't understand that bother me, but rather the things I do understand that bother me". A life that will not forgive and nurtures, feeds resentments... that life will find faith in a forgiving God difficult! A life that is ungracious and unwelcoming... that life will find faith in a gracious and welcoming God, a God who with outstretched arms risks crucifixion and vulnerability! A life that shouts "no" to life... that life will find faith in a God who says "Yes, Yes, Yes". In Jeremiah, the Lord says, "My people are foolish, they do not know me; they are stupid children, they have no understanding... they are skilled in doing evil". Those "skilled, proficient in doing evil"... they will find faith difficult. In his commentary on the Fourth Step of Twelve Step programs, Bill Wilson writes, "Without a searching and fearless moral inventory, most of us have found that the faith which really works in daily living is still out of reach"... without a change of lifestyle, "a faith which really works in daily living" is difficult, difficult indeed.

And lastly, unresolved experiences of pain will make faith difficult. Of all factors that make faith difficult, this may be the most challenging for me to explain in a few words but I will do my best. Many years ago I met a man (a successful, leading, major

entrepreneur in England) who was desperately trying to find “a faith which really works in daily living”. Several times we met and prayed but little progress seemed to be achieved... then one day, we were talking about the Lord’s prayer. At reference to “Our Father” the man’s attitude seemed to change, his demeanour altered... it seemed that his father (to say the least) was mean, abusive and controlling... these experiences made faith difficult. But, in the words of St. Paul to the young minister Timothy, as that man “felt grace overflowing him”, as that man experienced the “faith and love in Christ Jesus” that God the Father had for him, as that man enjoyed God’s “utmost patience” so that man’s faith began to grow.

The story is told of a dinner party at a country house, at which an actor and an old parson were among the guests. At one stage of the evening, the actor recited the 23rd Psalm, The Lord is my shepherd, with great beauty and was applauded by the guests. The parson repeated it, and moved people in a different way. “The difference,” said the actor, “is that I know the Psalm but you, you know the Shepherd”.

All of us (dare I say that?), all of us find faith difficult from time to time (and some find faith difficult most of the time) but it is our right, we are entitled to know and have faith in the Shepherd... and He will lead us, protect us and feed us... day by day.

AMEN

© Church of the Holy Trinity Rittenhouse Square. All rights reserved.