

## HEBREWS 11.8: RISK-TAKING AND GOD-TRUSTING

[Chelmsford 1/2/09]

DH Lawrence, the author of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and other books beside, once wrote: "*I know the greatness of Christianity: it is a past greatness. I know that, but for those early Christians, we should never have emerged from the chaos and hopeless disaster of the Dark Ages. If I had lived in the year 400, pray God, I should have been a true and passionate Christian. The adventurer. But now I live in 1924, and the Christian venture is done. The adventure is gone out of Christianity. We must start on a new venture towards God*".

Right or wrong? How do you react to these words of Lawrence?

He's wrong, of course – and yet he is right.

He's wrong, because the call to follow Jesus is a call to the greatest adventure a man or woman could ever have; and yet he's right, because in so many churches the adventure has gone out of following Jesus. It is as if all there is to following Jesus is going to church, singing hymns, and putting a fiver into the collection.

I believe that there is nothing more exciting or rewarding than being a follower of Jesus. When Jesus calls us to follow him, he calls us to take part in a revolution – a revolution in which we push aside the values of this world and instead espouse the values of Jesus.

Let me remind you of the values we have set ourselves as a Jesus community. We have said: "*If we are to fulfil our mission, then people around us need to see that we are genuinely committed to Jesus. We want to be a community which is:*

- *Warm and welcoming*
- *Risk-taking and God-trusting*
- *Excited and enthusiastic*
- *Sacrificing and resourcing*
- *Transforming lives and changing culture*"

Wow – what a set of values. Doesn't it make your mouth water? It does mine.

This is what God calls us to be. God calls us to be a Christian community which is warm and welcoming, risk-taking and God-trusting, excited and enthusiastic, sacrificing and resourcing, transforming lives and changing culture.

Lawrence was wrong – it's a great adventure being a Christian!

Today I want to look at what it means to be "**risk-taking and God-trusting**".

In the past the church has at times been known as '*the Tory party at prayer*'.

But God calls us to be radical Christians – Christians who take risks because they trust in God. If that doesn't excite you, then you must have the coldest of blood running in your veins!

### 1. FAITH IN ACTION

Christians are called to be "*risk-taking and God-trusting*".

Neither expression is found in the Bible – and yet they are both encompassed in the word "*faith*", which is of course found time and again in the Bible.

So let's look at the greatest chapter on faith in the Bible: Hebrews 11.

The word **faith** pops up there 24 times. Hebs 11 is a roll-call of men and women of faith: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses.

**“Should I go on? There isn’t enough time for me to speak of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets. Through faith they fought whole countries and won... They shut the mouths of lions, put our fierce fires, escaped being killed by the sword. They were weak, but became strong... Some were mocked and whipped, and others were put in chains and taken off to prison. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword. What a record all of these have won by their faith”** (11.32-39).

Following God makes the adventures of James Bond pale into insignificance!

Of these adventurers for God, Abraham was perhaps the greatest. In Hebs 11.8 we read: **“It was faith that made Abraham obey when God called him to go out to a country which God had promised to give him. He left his own country without knowing where he was going”**.

Like Abraham and all the other heroes of the past, we are called to be people of faith. But the question arises: *what is faith?*

I’m reminded of a Sunday School teacher, who asked his class: *“What is faith?”* A boy replied: *“Believing in something you know isn’t true”*. A laughable response – but alas I suspect that many people suffer from such naiveté.

What is faith? I have on my shelves a book entitled *‘Our Faith’*.

The first chapter is headed: *‘Is there a God?’* Is belief in God faith?

Well clearly believing in God is important. As the writer to the Hebrews says:

**“No one can please God without faith, for whoever comes to God must have faith that God exists and rewards those who seek him”** (11.6).

But there is nothing specifically Christian about such faith.

You could be a good Jew or a good Muslim and have such faith. Indeed, the apostle James said that even the demons have such faith: **“Do you believe there is only one God? Good! The demons also believe – and tremble with fear”** (2.19)

I have another book on my shelves entitled *‘The Faith of the Church’*.

It is an exposition of the Apostles Creed: *“I believe in God... and in Jesus Christ his only Son”*. This indeed is Christian faith.

But the sad truth is that Sunday by Sunday 1000s recite this creed and yet scarcely know what faith is. Their intellectual affirmation makes little difference to their lives.

The fact is that faith is more than intellectual assent.

I can, e.g. instance believe the moon is made of cheese (or indeed, not made of cheese), but that makes little difference to my life.

I can believe that rockets can take people to the moon, but until I have sufficient faith to step in, that belief makes no difference to my life.

Faith is more than believing – it is more than believing in God, or believing the Creed. Faith involves commitment – it involves trusting God and taking risks for God.

We see such commitment in Abraham. **“It was faith that made Abraham obey when God called him to go out to a country which God had promised to give him. He left his own country, without knowing where he was going”**

Faith must be put into action.

## 2. FAITH INVOLVES TRUST

When God called him, Abraham was living a comfortable life.

He was a citizen of Ur of the Chaldees, which the discoveries of archaeology have shown was a thriving ancient city.

The Bible makes clear that he was a wealthy man, so he no doubt lived at the time in one of the magnificent town-houses which have been unearthed in Ur.

Yes, life was good for him. But then God intervened in his life – **“God called him to travel to an unknown place that would become his home”** (The Message). And

Abraham exchanged his comfortable home in a pleasant town for a tent in the desert.

Why? Because Abraham believed that God had something better in store for him. **“He was waiting for the city which God has designed and built, the city with permanent foundations”** (11.10). There must have been times when that took some believing. It wasn't easy being a nomad for God.

Faith, we tell our children, is *“forsaking all I trust him”*. In Abraham's case trusting God really involved forsaking all – family, friends, home, and all the comforts of home.

## 3. FAITH INVOLVES RISK

For Abraham faith also involved a very real risk. **“He left his own country not knowing where he was going”**. That must have taken guts.

Abraham's faith adventure was very different from the mystery coach tours Lodges' Coaches advertise: although when you get on the coach you may now know your destination, one thing for sure is that you know that ultimately you will come back to the same bus stop – indeed, you even know the time when the coach is due back.

But when Abraham set out from Ur of the Chaldees not only had no idea of his destination, he had no idea whether he would ever return home. It was a real step of faith to follow the call of God.

## 4. FAITH TODAY

Enough of Abraham – he lived thousands of years ago. This morning I want to speak of us – and to say that ***we too need to be men & women of faith.***

Listen to the way in which the writer to the Hebrews prefaces his great chapter on faith: he says right at the end of chapter 10 **“We are not people who turn back and are lost. Instead we have faith and are saved”**. This leads him straight into chapter 11: **“To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see. It was by faith that people of ancient times – i.e. Abraham and his ilk – won God's approval”** (11.1-2)

If we are to win God's approval – if we are to be saved – then we need to have faith.

In the first place, *we need to have faith in the God who has sent his Son to die & rise for us.* In the language of the letter to the Hebrews: **“Let us... hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we have a great High Priest who has gone into the very presence of God – Jesus, the Son of God”.** Yes, God calls us to believe that in Jesus he has created a way back to himself.

The good news is that on the Cross of Jesus God has dealt with our sin – our sins are forgiven – God has saved us. Yes, that's where Christian believing begins.

Secondly, *we need to have faith in the God who has prepared a great future for those who have put their trust in him.* In the words of Hebrews: **“To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for”** (11.1).

The writer to the Hebrews thinks of the future in terms of a new city which God has prepared for those who have put their trust in him.

The writer of the Book of Revelation speaks of it being a new world where **“there will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain”** (Rev 21)

The good news is that death is not the end – but the gateway to a glorious future with God.

But faith is not just about the past and the future. It's also about the present.

***God calls us to trust him and risk our lives for him today.***

God may not call us to literally leave home and live in a tent, as Abraham did.

But he does call us to live as if this world were not our home.

Like Abraham, we are pilgrims en route to a destination of God's making.

Like Abraham we are called to trust God and risk our all for God.

Faith, if faith has any meaning for us, must affect the way we live.

It must affect the way we approach our work, the way we use our money, the way we spend our time.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians: **“If our hope in Christ is good for this life only and no more, then we deserve more pity than anyone else in the world”** (1 Cor 15.20).

Could the same be said of us? If our Christian faith were just make-believe and nothing more, would that make a mockery of the way in which we live our lives?

Do we truly trust God and arising from that trust risk all for him?

Right at the very beginning of our church's history the members of this church knew what it was to trust God and risk their all for God.

Our church as a community of Baptist-Christians was formed on 17 May 1905, with a total of 27 members. Just one month later they resolved to build a church holding 500 people at a cost of £2,300.

Three years later they did just that – save by then building the church and a manse cost £8,000. Wow – that took some faith. £8,000 was a small fortune.

Just 90 years later the church took another major step of faith, when it resolved to redevelop its premises at a cost of no more than £1.3 million.

At that stage the church had never raised more than £27,000 for one particular project.

In the event, everything went wrong – the roof began to collapse and water was found under the lift-shaft – with the result that the church had to find almost £2 million.

It is no exaggeration to say that many of the members of this church laid their lives on the line financially – they put their faith into action – they trusted God and risked their lives for God. And God honoured their faith.

But that is now all in the past. The fact is that God still calls us to exercise faith. To trust him, to live for him, and to risk life for him.

Let me give you just a few examples from Wednesday's church meeting of how you might express your faith in God:

### ***Part-time intern?***

What about giving one or two days a week to God by working for the church as part-time intern?

Currently Lesley Hodgson is giving 12 hours a week as an intern with responsibility for seniors ministry; Dan Easton is giving a day a week as an intern for sound/vision. But there is room for more interns.

- What a difference it would make if somebody were to give one or two days a week to running and developing our Alpha and post-Alpha courses.
- What a difference too it would make if somebody were to give two days a week to managing our Oasis café – we have some very committed helpers, but we really need a leader who could give two days a week to this ministry.

I wonder are there others in our church who might be prepared to take the risk of giving two days a week to God?

### ***Full-time intern?***

Or what about taking the risk of giving God a year of your life?

My mind goes to Emma, who served here for a year as a full-time intern. She dared to take out a full year for God to test whether or not God was calling her to ministry.

Is there another Emma in our midst, who is willing to take the risk of giving a year to God? It could be a young person; it could be an older person.

### ***A new form of serving?***

OK, maybe God wants you to remain in your job full-time. But that doesn't let you off the hook when it comes to risk-taking.

What about doing something for God in our church you have never done before? E.g. what about teaching in Light Factory? It doesn't involve you giving up your job, but if you are going to prepare properly then it involves giving up part of your leisure time.

Let me in particular challenge the men here: at the moment we have a lot of women teaching our children – but we have very few men acting as role models to our children. What about some men stepping out in faith and volunteering to help with our children?.

### ***A new level of giving?***

Or what about expressing your faith in God by increasing your giving.

As I was preparing this sermon I came across the following statement: Christian "*giving has to be significant to be meaningful. Try this test: if one week or month your giving was returned to you, would it make a meaningful difference in your situation? If not, it is not doing what giving is meant to do*". Interestingly only this week a young adult came to see me, and she said: I think the ministers of this church should be challenging us in terms of how much we give to God. Tithing, she said, isn't an option – it's a norm.

At Wednesday's church meeting we were told that we are currently heading for a £3000 on this year's budget. We were also told that next year will be even more of a challenge: gas prices, for instance, have just doubled. Furthermore, if we are to bring our ministerial team up to full strength, then we are going to need an extra £15,000. Wow – that is a lot of money, especially in these days of credit crunch, when money is tight and people are fearful for their jobs.

And yet for a church that says it wants to be risk-taking and God-trusting, that's not mega bucks. It's only £300 extra a week – if every member were to give an extra £1 a week, we would have money to spare. OK, maybe not everybody can afford an extra £1, but there are a number of us who could afford an extra £5 per week. Just think of Abraham and what he risked for God

The fact is that there is more to being a Christian than just coming to church, singing hymns, and putting an occasional fiver in the collection.

God wants each one of us to express our faith by living our lives for him – stepping out as though our faith really did matter.

He wants us to trust him and risk our lives for him.