

## **Sermon Reflective 04/08/24 – Faithfulness**

The fruits of the spirit are love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control and faithfulness.

What is faithfulness – well the best idea I have come across is a sort of loyalty plus. Loyalty being a strong sense of allegiance, faithfulness adding a sort of ‘through thick and thin’ dimension. In biblical terms there is a strong sense of it being a two way process – faithfulness to God is returned by the faithfulness of God.

That is so well illustrated by that very long reading we have just heard. All Jehoshaphat’s actions are based on his demonstration of his faith in God. All the people are called together, note not just warriors but including women and children, and there is public fasting, public worship and a public appeal for God’s help. I found myself wondering what sort of help the people thought that God would give – a thunderbolt that struck the opposing army, a lucky break in battle? What they got was a message through a third person, Jahaziel, ‘stand firm in the battle, do not lose heart’.

They set out for battle praising God as they go and take their places for conflict. That of itself required a high degree of faith. But suddenly the invaders seem far more interested in fighting each other – many are killed and the Israelites gain so much plunder it takes three days to collect. They return home with it and head straight for the temple where they give thanks to God. Their faith in God, their willingness to worship are rewarded not only by their preservation but by increased wealth.

Think of Abraham – despairing of ever having a son to inherit his wealth – but at the same time faithful to God’s promise that he would have numerous descendants if unclear how that would happen. And God was also faithful to the promise – in the birth of Isaac.

More modern examples? Well, appropriate at the moment, Eric Liddell who refused to run in the Olympics on a Sunday, ran an alternative race and was rewarded with a medal. His commitment to God continued when he became a missionary in the far East.

The press, who have a way with words, talk about the faithful in rather dismissive terms in both the contexts of party politics and religion. It is an expression tinged with the thought that these are people who may simply be doing what they have always done. Should we feel indignation? Yes. I read that faith needs us not to just believe in the person who appears in the gospels, but to believe that this is the person for us. It is far from superficial.

The press concept of the faithful is largely demonstrated by attending, services and coffee mornings, or canvassing and polling stations. For us, although there is nothing wrong with those things, it should mean so much more. There is a depth to faith. It

includes motivation, actions and how we present those actions. That is clumsily put but I mean for example the action might be to give money to charity, but we can then choose to tell people, to tell people only if challenged, or to keep it a secret. And the right course of action may differ in different circumstances – our demonstration of faithfulness is to try to discern the correct action at the time.

We are faithful by that discernment, through prayer, watchfulness, seeking advice and then following what we believe God wants of us. If we truly believe in that personal relationship with Jesus, we will want to serve on a personal level. And that means acting upon what we believe we should be doing.

It's so easy to say that. So often actions can be misinterpreted. Acting on a long term view, motivated by what God appears to be asking for can lead to criticism of naivety or being holier than thou. How to explain actions as God driven without appearing braggedly or putting ourselves on a pedestal. And our different viewpoints will lead to differing opinions on what is the correct way forward. Judgement does not only come from outside. You don't need to read much about the history of Christianity to find differing opinions.

It isn't only in our relationships with each other that we demonstrate our faith it is also in our relationship with the planet and its other inhabitants and natural resources. God's gift to us of a great place to live comes with his faith that we will look after it properly.

And what of God's faithfulness to us. That verse in John's gospel – God so loved the world that he sent his Son. He loved a world full of people who were selfish, argumentative, bellicose so much that he was willing to put his Son through a difficult life and a horrible death. He had faith that at least some of them would understand the importance of putting others before themselves of contributing to the bigger picture of the world and helping humanity to prosper.

For over 2000 years that has happened. There have been times when the church must have felt it was hanging on by its finger tips, when everything depended on the strong faith of a few people. But it has hung on, and the message has been passed on from generation to generation.

God's ultimate demonstration of faithfulness to humanity has been there since the beginning. There was evening – there was morning – the first day. And the sun has risen on many millions of days since then during which humanity has enjoyed the fruits of creation, given by a faithful God.