

**Faith, Gay Sex, and Sandi Toksvig: Sermon Preached at St John's, Devizes,
Sunday 7th August 2022 (The Eighth Sunday after Trinity)**

Readings – Hebrews 11: 1–3, 8–16; Luke 12:32–40

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen” – so writes the author of the Letter to the Hebrews. Faith and hope are intimately connected – they are the twin foundations for imagining a future that is better than the present.

We live in a society where faith is routinely derided as an unscientific delusion without evidence. Yet doing anything transformative requires us to dream dreams that go well beyond what the evidence will sustain; without faith we can only ever be anchored in a permanent present, unable to take risks because we're afraid of going into uncharted territory, where there isn't yet any evidence and we must rely on insight and inspiration.

Perhaps this is part of the reason why our culture seems to be so stagnant, trapped in an endless cycle of movie repeats and music that sounds like it could have been made thirty years ago. Our artists and musicians and writers and journalists are overwhelmed with data about what sells or what generates the clicks. Why take risks when you know what works? Even when the creatives themselves want to try something new out, the executives and editors have all the same data and seem to opt for profits over vision every time.

It seems that the more we know about the present, the less we are able to imagine an alternative to it. Drowning in numbers, we lack the sort of visions that can renew us into the future.

In practice, humanism has displaced Christianity as the official religion of this country. Of course, the Church of England still provides Christian liturgies for all the formal state occasions; but listen to the language of politicians of all

parties, or our leading cultural figures, and it is almost always couched in the terms of humanism.

One of our cultural leading lights, Sandi Toksvig, gave the Archbishop of Canterbury a public ticking off this week about the Lambeth Conference. She was herself a humanist, she said, but she was sure that “the sort of message” Jesus wanted to send people was for them to “just be a good person”.

Just be a good person. That’s a charming sentiment – coming from a nursery school teacher, perhaps, or an eight-year-old. It is genuinely startling to hear an intelligent person come to mature years and not observe that even good people sometimes do bad things – even when it is obvious what is good and what is not, which is not always the case.

I think that is another part of our present malaise – we tell ourselves that we’re good people, and indeed the official narrative seems to be that people are basically good unless they’ve been subject to some sort of horrific early childhood emotional trauma, or something like that. But we all know that we aren’t always good, indeed that we often hurt the ones we love the most, while that the people whom we love the most are often those who wound us most.

What we have faith *in* matters. Faith in Jesus Christ was displaced by faith in humanity. It wasn’t, however, faith in humanity as it actually is, but in an unrealistic theoretical model of the sort of human beings that would eventually emerge once everybody had a good education and we had the right structures of government in place.

Yesterday, I stumbled [upon an essay by the great British-Polish criminologist, Sir Leon Radzinowicz](#). In the years before the First World War, he recalled, it was widely believed that: “It was only a question of time before the advance of civilization would effectively eradicate crime as a mass phenomenon.” Nobody believes that now. That sort of faith in progress is dead. By this point, it is receding into the past more quickly than the background memory of Christianity that still undergirds Western culture.

More than anything else I think this is at the root of our societal unease – in the first decades of the 21st Century Westerners lost their faith, not in Christianity which had already declined, but in the rationalist materialist humanism that replaced it. Without faith, we find ourselves bereft of hope. In this suddenly anchorless society, how can we retell the Christian story so that it captures the imagination of the people, restores their faith, and renews their hope?

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen” – I am rather surprised to find myself saying this morning that I find my faith in Anglicanism renewed as a result of the Lambeth Conference. The Conference has received much negative coverage in the media, to the extent that you may have concluded it was a disaster.

Far from it. It is tempting to describe the outcome of the anticipated great intercontinental clash about the acceptability of same-sex relationships as a nice, sweet, piece of old fashioned Anglican fudge. I think we’ve done something better than that, in a world of conspiracy theories and angry mobs and cancelling people who disagree with us. Across the vast gulfs in attitudes that separate Devizes from Dar es Salaam or Virginia from Vanuatu, we have a commitment to walk together, trusting in one another’s good faith, even when the scale of our disagreement is such that it leaves most Western Anglicans and most African or Pacific Islander Anglicans simply bewildered by one another.

Many faithful churchpeople find the Church of England’s attitudes to same-sex couples, and its refusal to bless their relationships, a great test of their faith. Believe me, I sympathise, but I have faith that change is coming, soon. The Church, God-given as it is, will always be a flawed institution, like all institutions, because it is made up of human beings. But a society where institutions are weak is one where the strong and successful inevitably find it easy to trample over the weak and the poor. It is worth persevering with the institution, and with institutions generally.

Perhaps part what might recapture the imagination of our culture for the Christian story is that the Church might be a space where people of radically

differing views can co-exist – co-exist not because we’re all such good people, but because we know that all of us need grace, and acceptance for what we are, and forgiveness.

In fact, the things that test our faith in the Church are rarely the big social issues, or the big theological questions, but the ways we sometimes bump up against our neighbours in the same congregation in very mundane matters; the ways that we hurt and are hurt, make mistakes and are at the wrong end of other people’s mistakes. Each of us bears wounds; each of us also needs forgiveness.

“Have your lamps lit”, says Jesus in the cryptic series of parables that formed our Gospel reading this morning. At our final judgement – unfashionable as it is to talk about it – each of us will have to be forgiven much. Prepare for it now. Take up the hard work of forgiving. It is by no means the same as pretending that the wrongs we have endured have never happened, and it is indeed hard work; I have often not succeeded in it.

It sounds odd, but the last judgement it is actually a liberating doctrine: we can leave judgement to God, rather than being weighed down by it ourselves, and also trust that there is a moral order to the universe, that doing good matters, that those who pass into eternity having profited from lives of wickedness will be held to account by the God whose mercy and justice alike exceed ours.

In the end, as Julian of Norwich put it, all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well, for God has already redeemed us not because we are good, but because He is love.

When we accept that we are already loved just as we are, with all our flaws, we are freed to have visions of what it might mean to build God’s Kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven, and that faith renews our hope.

And now to God be the glory, the Father the creator of all life, the Son the restorer to new life, the Spirit who breathes in all life, now and forever, as is most justly his due. Amen.

