

Sunday 9th August 2020 – “Give me the faith...”
(prepared by Arthur Cowburn)

StF 51

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father,
There is no shadow of turning with thee;
Thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not;
As thou hast been thou for ever wilt be:

Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed thy hand hath provided.
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.

Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above,
Join with all nature in manifold witness
To thy great faithfulness, mercy and love.

Great is thy faithfulness!...

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!

Great is thy faithfulness!...

Thomas O Chisholm (1866-1960)

© 1923 renewed 1951 Hope Publishing Company CCLI 61615

Prayer

Eternal and ever loving God, you show your faithfulness to us in many ways.
We experience it in the wonders of your creation, great and small.
We discover it in the love of our friends and families.
We find it as your Spirit seeks to guide us in our lives.
Yet, our love for you is weak.
We miss opportunities to share your love because we are afraid
Or we lack confidence in ourselves to speak of you.
But you were faithful in sending your son, Jesus
That through him our sin might be forgiven.
May we know that forgiveness in our hearts and lives
And dedicate ourselves to living to your praise and glory. Amen

1 Kings 19: 9-18

⁹There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” ¹⁰He replied, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

¹¹The LORD said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. ¹²After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. ¹³When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

¹⁴He replied, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

¹⁵The LORD said to him, “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. ¹⁶Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. ¹⁷Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. ¹⁸Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.”

Matthew 14: 22-33

²² Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. ²³ After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, ²⁴ and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

²⁵ Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. ²⁶ When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.

²⁷ But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

²⁸ "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

²⁹ "Come," he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"

³¹ Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"

³² And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. ³³ Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

StF 426

Hark, my soul! It is the Lord;
'tis thy Saviour, hear his word;
Jesus speaks, and speaks to thee:
"Say, poor sinner, lov'st thou me?"

"I delivered thee when bound,
And, when bleeding, healed thy wound;
Sought thee wandering, set thee right,
Turned thy darkness into light.

Can a woman's tender care
Cease toward the child she bare?
Yes, she may forgetful be,
Yet will I remember thee.

Mine is an unchanging love,
higher than the Heights above,
deeper than the depths beneath,
free and faithful, strong as death.

Thou shalt see my glory soon,
when the work of grace is done;
partner of my throne shalt be;
say, poor sinner, lov'st thou me? "

Lord, it is my chief complaint
that my love is weak and faint;
yet I love thee, and adore;
O for grace to love thee more!

William Cowper (1731-1800)

Sermon

One of the things I've missed most this summer has been our annual trip to the Scottish Highlands. The majesty of the mountains is something that the South Downs cannot compare with. And I don't think it's a coincidence that many of the encounters with God in the bible take place on the top of mountains. They are wonderfully spiritual places.

Both these readings incorporate a meeting with God on a mountain. Jesus, having fed the 5000, goes up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Perhaps he just needs that space after all that's been going on, time to communicate with God and to recharge his batteries. Elijah is there because he's on the run again and perhaps the last person he wants to meet with, other than Ahab and Jezebel, is God. But God is the one thing we can never run away from and Elijah has to face that question, "What are you doing here Elijah?" Although I've never had to face the sorts of challenges Elijah had, I've got great sympathy with him. I grew up in a reasonably large Sunday School but by the time I left to go to University I was the only one left. It felt like Christianity was something outdated, certainly not for young people and I had decided that once I left, that would be it, me and the church would part company.

God had other ideas though and surprised me by providing lots of Christian friends when I felt lonely and isolated, a long way from home. God doesn't do that for Elijah immediately although he provides the assurance that Elijah is not on his own. There are 7000 who still feel the way he does about the Jewish faith. And although there's a magnificent display of thunderstorms and earthquakes, it's in the still, small voice that Elijah finds the reassurance. Often, it's in the darkest times that we encounter the wonder of God in the stillness.

Whilst Jesus is up the mountain, the disciples are also having a difficult time of it. They have been sent across the lake by Jesus in a boat, but the wind is against them and they're struggling to make progress. Just before dawn they see the most unexpected sight of somebody walking towards them across the water. No wonder they're frightened. But then Jesus speaks saying, "Take courage! It is I!" There is a suggestion in some commentaries that this may be a similar construction to that used in Moses encounter with God at the burning bush when God declares himself to be I am. Don't be afraid, Jesus is saying to his disciples, God is still in control.

Which, of course, leads to one of the great comedy moments in the gospels where Peter decides that if it is Jesus, he wants to do what Jesus can do and walk on the water. I'm giving him full marks for bravery for even trying. Some years ago, we were at Bolton Abbey in Yorkshire where there is a famous, quite long set of steppingstones across a fast flowing river. As we ate lunch, we watched people going backwards and forwards on them and I was persuaded to give it a try. However, I have no head for heights and an atrocious sense of balance. I'd only gone about 3 or 4 steps when I looked down at the fast-moving water, the distance across the river to the other side and panicked. I just froze and had to be coaxed to turn round and get back to the safety of the bank. Something similar happens to Peter, he begins to sink and has to be hauled back into the boat.

Perhaps that's the real wonder of God. That God trusts human beings, weak and frail as we are, to do his work on earth. Elijah knows the power of God. He has defeated the Prophets of Baal in the Great Barbecue Challenge but still feels vulnerable against Ahab and Jezebel. The disciples have seen the amazing things that Jesus can do, and Peter has managed to begin to walk across the water but then his faith lets him down.

How often is that the case for us? We see other people doing amazing things in the power of God but think that's for them and not for me. We know deep down that we have a wonderful message to proclaim to the world but aren't even sure how to begin. We hear that the Church is growing across the world but because we don't necessarily see signs of numerical growth in our own churches feel that the world is against us and we are fighting a lonely battle. And yet God still comes and asks, "What are you doing here?" and Jesus still comes before the dawn and says "Take Courage! It is I!" We are trusted by God and empowered to be his servants in the world however great our doubts and lack of faith in our own ability. What a wonderful message of hope that is for the world and for us.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord God, we come before you to pray for all those people for whom taking risks is a way of life.

Lord, reveal yourself to them and keep them safe.

We pray for our emergency services – paramedics, the police, the fire service – all who daily face difficult situations as they seek to help to protect us and make our world a safer and more peaceful place.

Lord, reveal yourself to them and keep them safe.

We pray for people who work in troubled areas – the armed forces in war zones, those who bring humanitarian aid into areas of natural disaster, and many more.

Lord, reveal yourself to them and keep them safe.

We pray for all those who have taken risks during this time of coronavirus Doctors, nurses, and other people in the NHS.

Those who work in care homes or provide care in the community Delivery drivers, postmen, shop workers and all others who have enabled us to receive the things we need.

Lord, reveal yourself to them and keep them safe.

We pray for people who take risks in your name, Lord Jesus – those who take your word where it is most needed – and for people who grapple with faith and doubt.

Lord, reveal yourself to them and keep them safe.

We pray for those who are afraid and uncertain. Those worried about the safety of going outside Those anxious about the health of loved ones Those worried about life following a bereavement.

Lord, reveal yourself to them and keep them safe.

We pray ourselves that we might have the courage To share your love by our words and our actions.

Lord, reveal yourself to us and keep us safe.

Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

StF 661

Give me the faith which can remove
and sink the mountain to a plain;
give me the child like praying love,
which longs to build thy house again;
thy love, let it my heart o'erpower,
and all my simple soul devour .

I would the precious time redeem,
and longer live for this alone:
to spend, and to be spent, for them
who have not yet my saviour known;
fully on these my mission prove,
and only breathe, to breathe thy love.

My talents, gifts, and graces, Lord,
into thy blessed hands receive ;
and let me live to preach thy word,
and let me to thy glory live;
my every sacred moment spend
in publishing the sinners friend.

Enlarge, inflame, and fill my heart
with boundless charity divine:
so shall I all my strength exert,
and love them with a zeal like thine;
and lead them to thy open side,
the sheep for whom their Shepherd died.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)