

Sunday between 6th and 12th November [32]

Mark 12:38-44

Do we live in a world where there is a lack of faith? Is our society lacking in faith compared to how we remember it in the past? Well if you are talking about the Christian faith then the answer is probably yes, we see fewer and fewer professing, active Christians in public life, in leadership and in our towns and neighbourhoods. But have people really given up on having faith? We can argue that is not the case, everyone has faith in something, it's the something in which they have faith which has changed.

Think about how it is today when we take a journey, how many people plan their route with a map or road atlas, write out directions for themselves and keep close by the map during the journey so that route changes can be made if required? Not many, most people now will put their faith in a sat nav. There is nothing wrong with sat nav, it will be more up to date than a printed map or atlas because new roads can be added at a click of a button. It can provide additional information such as expected time of arrival for a journey taking into account current traffic conditions, so it's even better than a map in some ways. But it has great potential to let the driver down, it might be affected by heat in the car, it could be dropped and broken, it might suffer a system crash or it may run out of battery because someone forgot to charge it or bring the lead along. There are all sorts of things that can go wrong with a sat nav and yet we weigh up the benefits against the risks and use them anyway.

Perhaps that is what it is like for many people in terms of their faith in other things too. Most people in our lives are doing ok, life has its up and downs but they have a job and a home, food on the table and clothes to wear, they are self sufficient, their needs are met by their own hard work, income and decisions. It is fair to say that if that is your experience of life, when someone like us comes along and says turn to Christ that you may be saved, they are likely to wonder what exactly they need to be saved from. You see we don't think of ourselves, or at least most people don't think of themselves as anything other than physical beings, we have physical needs of food, shelter, clothing and we enjoy the feeling we get from friends and family, we meet those needs and we're sorted. In our scientifically led age we have ignored the philosophers and don't think of ourselves beyond the physical very much at all.

So you see, it's pretty difficult to get people on board to take on a product that they don't think they need. We're alright, they say, we don't need to put our faith in God, God may not even exist for all we know, you can offer no evidence of God and I'm not willing to spend any time looking for something I am not missing. So our world is not lacking in faith, it is just placing its faith in something other than God.

Our readings today are all about where one's faith is best placed. In Ruth, we are reminded of a woman who put her faith in the God of her husband via her mother-in-law. Ruth followed Naomi to a strange place where she was not readily accepted, followed her instructions in her encounter with Boaz and then, trusted Boaz to navigate the legal system of his people to allow the two to be married as they wished. Ruth had nothing to lose, neither did Naomi, and in their need God gave them inspiration to enable them to meet that need.

The letter to Hebrews also speaks of the proper place for faith as the writer compares and contrasts the old Jewish law of rules and sacrifices designed to purify people to come into God's presence, with Jesus, 1 complete sacrifice which makes us fully acceptable in the sight of God, all the time, as we are, by grace. We hear that shift in focus of faith, don't put your faith in your own ability to be righteous enough for God, that way is flawed, none of us is truly worthy and how many animals must die in your place to wash you clean, have faith in Jesus and his ability to make all things possible, to make all of us acceptable to approach the throne of God, not because of something we have done, but because of something He has done.

And then we come to the gospel reading, another contrast. The leaders all dressed in their finery, loving the attention they get for the outward appearance of holiness. That's a risk for us today, that's a risk for some clergy today. Some clergy dress in a way that sets them apart, they have reasons for doing that in terms of making themselves accessible, showing others they can approach them, being honest and open about their role in the community as servant. But the moment they begin to be comfortable with, even enjoy the attention it brings, and it does cause the odd glance and the audible whisper in passing, once that is fun for them, they are putting their faith in the clothes, the attention and the position in the community, that's a risky place to be.

Contrast with that the poor widow bringing her offering to the temple. No one gives her a second glance, she requires and is offered no attention and yet she is the example of one who truly knows where her trust and faith ought to be placed. She is not alright, she doesn't have enough, she will suffer hardships as she has already, no doubt, experienced. And yet, she gives 2 coins into the temple treasury. She gives first to God and then lives on what is left, she puts her faith in God through the human systems in place at the time which offered that relationship.

Through Christ we each of us have access to that relationship, in response to it we have our relationship with one another through the Church. Our need to show our support to the church and to one another by way of monetary offering remains the same. Our giving is just like that of the woman at the temple, it is an expression of where we put our faith. Jesus himself tells us, both in Matthew and Luke's gospels, where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. Giving to God first, putting God first, thinking of God first, making time for prayer and worship, offering help and support to God's people in need, all of this is an indication of our relationship with the Almighty. We don't have rules at our church about tithing a percentage of income or an amount of time, or signing up to particular things in order to be a member, rather we encourage one another to engage with the journey of faith as individuals, and we trust God that as we grow and learn, our needs as an institution will be met. We don't expect to get rich, but we have faith that God will meet our needs. In that faith we identify the first fruits of the Church's income, to mission and the support of others, in God's name. It is no coincidence that the more we give to God, the more we receive, when God is our first thought and concern, everything else falls into place.

We are not self sufficient, when life goes well it may seem like that, but under our own power we may fail in life and we will certainly struggle thereafter. So may God reign in us, and let our hearts be ever and only with the Lord.