

Scripture: Genesis 15: 1-6 / Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16

Text: *Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*  
(Hebrews 11: 1)

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT, AMEN**

However else it can be described, the life of the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland can never be described as dull.

Since May's Assembly Margaret and I have been in Ireland for the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Ireland, in Southport for the Assembly of the United Reformed Church Assembly and in Llandudno for the Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Wales.

I took part in the service at St Paul's Cathedral to celebrate the Queen's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday and the following day Margaret and I were guests at the Trooping of the Colour.

I have preached at Caldercruix and Longriggend as part of their 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary weekend celebrations, and at our neighbours in the Old Kirk and Muirhouse and, following the Brexit vote at the EU Referendum, led prayers for the nation at a Sunday service in St Giles.

Margaret and I attended the National Prayer Breakfast and we were guests at the Royal Garden Party where I was able to introduce her to the Queen and also at the Royal Highland Show – on this occasion it was Margaret who knew the difference between the sheep and the goats.

I have presented awards to Crossreach staff, dedicated a memorial window at the Church of the Holy Rood in Stirling, attended a Somme vigil at Edinburgh Castle, preached at the National Scottish War Memorial Service, acted as the Reviewing Officer at a 21 gun salute to welcome the Queen to Edinburgh, hosted a reception for the stewards at the General Assembly and even presented the prizes at my old school Kilmarnock Academy's prize-giving.

Next week I will be the guest preacher at St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral in Palmerston Place, the following week back to Kilmarnock and Kay Park church and the week after that the guest preacher at Arbroath Knox's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations.

See me.....see busy!

However this was always going to be a very special day in my diary, the Sunday I came home to Cramond, and to say that as Moderator I bring you the greetings, prayers and good wishes of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

Of course, you shouldn't confuse any of the above with hard work, suffice to say even this early into my year of office there have already been mornings when I have opened my eyes and wondered, where am I, what am I doing and where am I going next.

So let me speak this morning about where we are going next and to help me do so a story I have told before about the American evangelist, Billy Graham.

Born in November 1918 in Charlotte, North Carolina, a Southern Baptist by tradition, Billy Graham was one of the outstanding Christian leaders in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and many people the world over attribute the awakening of their Christian faith to having attended one of Billy Graham's rallies.

A few years ago, long after he retired from active ministry, Billy Graham was invited to a lunch held in his honour.

At the close of the lunch Graham told a story about Albert Einstein, the great physicist, who was once travelling by train from Princeton when the conductor came down the aisle, punching the tickets of every passenger.

Einstein reached into his jacket pocket.

No ticket

So he reached into his trouser pocket.

Still no ticket

So he looked in his briefcase and then under his seat and then under the seat beside him but still he couldn't find his ticket.

At which point the conductor said,

*'Dr Einstein, I know who you are.*

*We all know who you are.*

*I am sure you bought a ticket.*

*Don't worry about it.'*

Einstein nodded appreciatively - but kept looking for his ticket.

The conductor reassured the great man not to worry because he knew who he was and was quite sure Einstein had bought a ticket.

At which point Albert Einstein is reported to have said

*Young man, I too know who I am.*

*The problem is I don't know where I'm going.'*

It is a good story but it was what Graham said next that made it memorable.

*My children and grandchildren are telling me I've gotten a little slovenly in my old age,*  
he said.

*I used to be a bit more fastidious.*

*So I went out and bought a new suit for this luncheon and for one more occasion.*

*This is the suit in which I'll be buried.*

*But when you hear I'm dead I don't want you to immediately remember the suit I'm wearing.*

*I want you to remember this: I too not only know who I am, I also know where I'm going.'*

Simple, personal and direct.....

If as a preacher I admire Graham's gift of communication, his extraordinary capacity to speak so directly to people from all walks of life, I suspect most of us would admire his conviction and the strength of his faith.

As the end of his long life approaches Graham knows who he is and is confident about where he is going – and perhaps you wish your conviction and faith was so strong.

If so then let me remind you of perhaps the best definition of what it means to live with faith.

*Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.*

Like the finest poetry the words soar and inspire, mysterious and majestic.

Immediately we sense the author is leading us to holy ground, to that meeting place between heaven and earth where the deep longings, hopes and dreams of the human spirit are found.

And to help us grasp what it means to have conviction in something hoped for and something not seen, the author points us to Abraham.

Abraham; the great patriarch of the people of Israel, the man whom God called to leave his country and his people and his father's household and go to a land God would show him.

In a culture where home and family ties meant everything, and where land was handed down from generation to generation, what God asked of Abraham – to up sticks and move away - broke all social and cultural norms.

Yet to a man who was childless, that is, with no-one to be his heir, God's promise to make of Abraham and his descendants a great nation was worth everything.

So it was that not knowing exactly in human terms where he was going, Abraham left his father's household and set off on the basis of a promise – and in so doing Abraham provided the author of Hebrews with a perfect example of *the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen*.

The irony is, however, Abraham is anything but a perfect role model for the life of faith.

Rather than being flushed with success at God's promise of great reward, Abraham was soon thoroughly disillusioned with life and not a little apprehensive about the future.

As his journey unfolds Abraham tries to pass off his wife Sarah as his sister and then makes arrangements for Eliezar of Damascus, a servant in his household, to be his heir.

In other words, far from being a paragon of virtue, a plaster cast saint who lived a perfect life and whose faith was always strong, Abraham turned out to be as human as the rest of us.

There were days when his life was good and his faith strong and he willingly followed where he believed God was leading.

There were days when his life was so awful and he was wracked with such doubt and had such little confidence in what God had promised, Abraham started to make other arrangements.

And yet the author of Hebrews still holds Abraham up as an exemplar of faith, not because everything in his life was plain sailing but because even in his darkest moments Abraham continued to trust things would turn out God's way.

One of the things I like about Abraham's story is this; it was not the strength of Abraham's faith that mattered, it was the strength of God's promise and God's faithfulness that mattered.

Here is a deep truth to encourage and sustain all of us through good days and bad – God can be trusted to keep God's promises.

If it has been a truth which has sustained countless Christian people down through the centuries, it is one which has sustained Billy Graham throughout his remarkable ministry and sustains him at his life's end.

Billy Graham knows who he is, and he knows where he is going - because God can be trusted to keep God's promises.

And however much you believe or however much you doubt, because God can be trusted, you know too.

*Now unto him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end, Amen*