

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Believing is seeing

Presented by Bob Smith

Do you remember that wonderful song from the musical *South Pacific* where Nurse Nellie Forbush looks out across the islands and sees what she thinks are little clouds on the horizon? But Emile, the French planter, tells her they aren't clouds, they are gunsmoke.

Faced again with the reality that even in that South Sea paradise young men are being killed she sings a song that says, "When the sky is a bright canary yellow, I forget every cloud I've ever seen. So they call me a cock-eyed optimist, immature and incurably green. I could say life is just a bowl of Jell-o, and appear more intelligent and smart. But I'm stuck like a dope with a thing called hope, and I can't get it out of my heart."

Well, I'm stuck with the same thing. It would be very easy to look out on the world and, on the basis of what you observe, conclude that the world is a jungle and life is an empty struggle, which even the strongest eventually lose. But like Nellie Forbush, I believe that what I may see at this moment in time is not all that there is. But I also believe that God is, and, like the Bible says, that he rewards those who diligently seek him.

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Chapter 11 of the Book of Hebrews opens with these words, "Faith makes us sure of what we hope for and gives us proof of what we can't see." For the past couple of centuries the Western World has tended to judge reality by what can be proved scientifically. Yet increasingly research has shown that there are all sorts of realities that are not perceived by deductive reasoning, but are perceived intuitively.

For example, you could read a learned treatise on the physical, chemical, psychological and sociological factors involved in falling in love, but never understand what falling in love is. But within each of us there is an intuitive understanding of love that causes us to feel the most acute longing or the most abject misery - depending on whether or not that longing finds its desired end. This is one of those realities we grasp intuitively, not intellectually.

Faith is like that. Faith taps into that deep well of spiritual reality that lies, often hidden, within each of us. Faith is the intuitive understanding that those spiritual realities are true and accessible. Faith is not gullibility - believing every nonsensical thing that religious charlatans try to sell us. Neither is it just an intellectual acceptance of what seems to be a logical proposition. Faith is our own spiritual perception of those things that our innermost being tells us are true.

I love the way that Sir Alec Guinness, that brilliant actor, describes it in his autobiography, *Blessings in Disguise*. He wrote about how one day whilst walking through London he felt an irresistible urge to start running. He said "With joy in my heart, and in a state of almost sexual excitement, I ran until I reached a little Catholic church, which I had never entered before; I knelt; caught my breath, and for 10 minutes was

lost to the world.” He was at a loss to explain his actions until he finally decided it was a “rather nonsensical gesture of love,” an outburst of thanksgiving.

It was also part of his personal journey from atheism to faith; a journey, which began when he was playing the lead role in the famous Father Brown movie, about a priest who, is also an amateur detective. His son, Matthew, was stricken with polio, and Guinness made what he called “a negative bargain” with God. If his son recovered he vowed he would never prevent him from becoming a believer. Matthew did recover, but it was Alec Guinness who found faith. He came to realise that despite his lifelong protestations to the contrary, deep within him he knew God was there. And when he accepted that suddenly everything became clear.

St Augustine, one of the most brilliant theological and philosophical minds of all time, said this about faith, “Understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore seek not to understand that you may believe, but believe that you may understand.” Another way of putting it is not to say, “seeing is believing,” but rather “believing is seeing.”

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Faith is not only the way in which we perceive spiritual reality, it is also the means by which we receive its blessings and challenges into our lives. It is faith that causes us to know that no matter what is happening in our lives God is there and God does care. But it is also faith that enables us to understand and respond to what God wants to do in our lives. The Book of Hebrews says “Without faith it is impossible to please God.” It goes on, in Chapter 11, to give a long list of all sorts of people, men and women, rich and poor, aristocrats and commoners whose lives and deeds demonstrated how God does extraordinary things through very ordinary people.

We see the same thing in the stories of Jesus that appear in the Gospels. Time and again we read of how Jesus did marvellous things for people and then explained it all by saying something like, “Your faith has healed you, go in peace.” If there is one statement of Jesus that really sums it all up it has to be the words, “According to your faith be it unto you.” The implication is that God’s power through Jesus to touch our lives is as real now as ever it was, “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and forever,” the Bible says. But how much of that power we actually experience is determined by the level of our faith – the degree to which we are prepared not only to believe God’s promises intellectually, but also to act on them.

One of my very great friends is a man who for years has been a proponent of divine healing. Coming from a background in both theology and psychology he believes that the church still has a ministry of healing and that through faith people are able to tap the healing power of Christ that was so evident during his earthly ministry. Well, as it happened, this man himself suffered from a degenerative disease that caused him to retire from paid employment. Some years ago his condition became so severe that he was admitted to hospital and spent nearly six weeks there while all sorts of doctors tried to get his condition under control, but with no success. It reached the point where his life was threatened by it.

About that time I visited him in hospital and, at his daughter’s suggestion, I plucked up the courage to ask him why it was that after all his years of advocating the idea that God can still heal in response to faith, he wasn’t doing what he had been preaching. I’ll never forget his reply. He said, “I’ve been waiting for someone to take the risk with me.” So, a few days later, with another minister, I met him in the hospital chapel. We read the words from the Book of James that encourage the sick to call for the elders of the church to anoint them with oil and pray for healing. Then we did that very thing, expressing our faith in God’s power to heal him and praying that if it were God’s will it would be done. Two days later his condition was so improved that he was released from hospital. Within two months all medication had ceased.

Later on he described what had happened to him at the moment we had anointed and prayed for him. He said that he had felt a tingle, almost like an electric shock, go through his body from the top of his head to his feet; and he knew that God had healed him and all would be well. But the point of the story is this; it's not enough to just believe something intellectually. Real faith means taking the risk; stepping out and doing what we believe God is calling us to do.

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In the Book of Hebrews chapter 11 we have a list of people who are often referred to as “the heroes of faith.” People whose “faith helped them conquer kingdoms...close the jaws of lions and put out raging fires and escape from the swords of their enemies.” But then it goes on to list some other “heroes of faith;” people who weren't delivered from their troubles and oppressors. They were “made fun of and beaten with whips...chained in jail...killed...they were poor, mistreated and tortured ...they had to wander in deserts and on mountains...” But the list ends with these words, “All of them pleased God because of their faith.”

Faith doesn't always mean deliverance from troubles. Often faith means receiving the strength and courage to endure. But that is equally an expression of faith with those wonderful stories of healing and deliverance that preachers love to proclaim. I believe that our greatest experiences of faith are not when we are sitting in church singing happy songs, but those times when we are hanging on by our finger nails, still trusting – even if only just – but refusing to let go. Speaking of people like this the book of Hebrews says, “They were weak people who were given strength.” No one starts out as a giant of faith. We all learn as we go. The life of faith is a series of experiences, each of which calls us to step out from our comfort zone to where God wants us to be. And it doesn't get easier as we go. Every new challenge to step out in faith involves the same demand for us to move out of our comfort zone – and that never gets easier.

C.S. Lewis once commented that the year he found faith in God was the same year he learned to dive. On reflection he thought that there was some significance in that. Plucking up the courage to launch yourself headfirst into water is an amazingly difficult thing to do, the first time you do it. Your brain tells you that there is no problem in it, but your fears hold you back. Finally, after numerous feet first jumps and then half-hearted belly flops, you pluck up the courage and you actually go in headfirst. It is an act of faith – you know it will work out, but taking that first leap is so difficult.

That's how the process of becoming a person of faith works. You believe intellectually that whatever God brings your way, or whatever you sense God calls you to do, that he will provide all you need to do it. But to actually take that leap of faith – to launch yourself out from your comfort zone – is very hard to do. But once you have done it a whole new dimension of living opens up.

Like the heroes of the Bible this never comes easily. We all learn to be people of faith by taking those first faltering leaps that then encourage us to bigger leaps. We are all weak people who are given strength

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I remember one of my friends describing his first parachute jump to me. He was an Army chaplain who went through the 3 week course in parachuting which eventually led to the point where he and the other trainees had to do a series of day and night time jumps from an aircraft. He told me that the training was excellent and everyone was really pumped up and ready to go – until the time for the first jump came round. It was then that he, along with the others, realised what it was like to be pushed to the threshold of one's fear. As the aircraft approached the dropping zone a red light came on and everyone stood up and, as they had been trained to do, clipped their parachute release to the static line, checked the equipment of the man in front and waited while the rear door of the aircraft opened.

As they stood there, tense and afraid, their instructor simply said to them, “Forget what you feel, trust what you’ve been taught.” Then the green light came on and they began to march out and step into nothingness. The drill they had learned overcame their individual fear. “As I stepped out of the aircraft,” he said, “There was just the sound of the rushing air until suddenly I was yanked back by the straps on my shoulders. I looked up and there was the canopy of my parachute above me, and my fear turned to absolute exhilaration as I floated to earth.”

Well, that’s what faith is, stepping out beyond our security to where we sense God is calling us to be and, as we take that step, finding that Jesus is there with us, just as he always was and always will be.

A Prayer

Lord, help us to commit ourselves to those spiritual realities that we inwardly know to be true, and give us the courage to always step out to where you are calling us to be.

Amen.