

“Ambidextrous Faith”
Mark 11:22 – 23; Acts 12:1 – 11;
Hebrews 11:32 – 40

I thought I would begin this morning with an extract from the “The Sacred Diary of Adrian Plass (aged 37 ½)”¹, where Adrian reflects on the power of faith.

Monday January 6th "Went into the Christian bookshop on my way home from work tonight.

All those books!

Gerald says Christian paperbacks are like Chinese meals. Very satisfying at the time, but it's not long before you want another one."

Bought a really great book about faith this time, though.

It's called 'Goodness gracious--in God's name, what on Earth are we doing for Heaven's sake?'

"A very witty title I feel.

"It's all about how Christians should be able to move mountains by faith, if they are really tuned into God."

"Very inspiring."

Waited 'till there was no-one around, then practised with a paper-clip. Put it on my desk and stared at it, willing it to move. Nothing! Tried commanding it in a loud voice.

Gerald came in just then, and said, 'What's all the shouting about, Dad?'

Could hardly tell him I was shouting orders at a paper-clip.

Said I was practising voice-projection.

He said, "What for?"

I said, "I don't know." Felt really stupid.

Tuesday January 7th.

Had another go with the paper-clip tonight. I really took authority over it.

Couldn't get it to budge.

Told God I'd give up anything he wanted, if he would just make it move half an inch.

Nothing!

All rather worrying really. If you only need faith the size of a mustard seed to move a mountain, what hope is there for me when I can't even get a paper-clip to do what it's told!

¹ Adrian Plass, *The Sacred Diary of Adrian Plass (aged 37 3/4)* (Fount: London, 1991), 19 – 23.

Wednesday January 8th.

Told Anne later that I'd heard about a man who tried to move a paper-clip by faith and couldn't do it. She yawned and said, 'Well, you always get your lunatic fringe, don't you!'

Thursday January 9th

Study-group tonight....Forgot about the paper-clip-business for almost an hour, quite distracted by thinking about Jesus.....

Saturday January 11th.

Got up early to have a last go at that blasted paper-clip.
Ended up hissing viciously at it, trying not to wake everybody up.
When I gave up and opened the door, I found Anne and Gerald listening outside in their night-closes, and looking quite anxious.
Anne said, 'Darling, why did you tell that paper-clip you'd straighten it out if it didn't soon get its damned act together?'

Jesus did talk a lot about faith, and in many cases, the lack of it, whether amongst His own disciples or amongst the general population.

It's difficult though to talk about faith today because it has so many conflicting notions attached to it.

Some people equate faith with being a feeling – popular culture reduces faith to sentimentality. It's kind of whimsical. Kind of like the "Force" in Star Wars.

At the other (extreme) end of spectrum there's this teaching is the faith is almost entirely intellectual.

In Scripture it covers a wide area of spectrum of meaning.

At one level it simply means belief, the cognitive recognition that something is true or real.

But Jesus emphasised something more than that.

Jesus was clear: faith has a clear focus; "Have faith in *God*."

He wasn't just saying to people, "Do you believe in God, do you think He's real?" but "Do you trust Him?"

And in this morning's reading this was an encouragement to trust God for the seemingly impossible.

There is an aspect of faith that sees the insurmountable attained.

Faith that moves mountains is the confidence that the same Jesus who did amazing things in the Bible still does amazing things today.

It's trusting that Jesus who healed people in the past still heals people even now.

It believes that the God who acted in Scripture is just as capable of doing the outstanding in our lives today.

When Kim was a young girl, her dad pulled the car off the road one day to help a woman change a flat tire. While he was lying under her car, another vehicle accidentally swerved to the shoulder, and in the collision the car was shoved onto his chest.

Five of his ribs were broken, and his left lung was pierced and began filling with blood. His wife, who is barely five-feet-tall, placed her hands on the bumper of the car and prayed, "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ," and lifted the car off his chest so he could be dragged out. Kim's father was in a state of shock as he was taken to the hospital. Doctors prepared him for emergency surgery. "His chance of survival was doubtful at best.

Suddenly, spontaneously, the man's skin changed from ashen to pink. He experienced a miraculous healing. He invited a surprised surgical team to join him in singing "Fairest Lord Jesus." They did not even bother to hook him up to oxygen.

And here's the thing: he did not find out until later that this was the precise moment his father-in-law, who was a pastor, had his congregation start to pray for him.

Sometimes these stories come from not-very-credible sources – such as email scams.

In this case, however, the subject was James Loder, who was a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary in the United States.

His life was not only saved, but changed. Until then, although he taught at a seminary, God had been mostly an abstract idea to him. Now Jesus became a living Presence. Kim writes that her father's heart grew so tender that he became known at Princeton as "the weeping professor."²

This kind of faith, this belief and trust in God, was the kind I revelled in as a young follower of Jesus.

² John Ortberg, *God is Closer Than You Think* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 24 – 25.

The kind of faith described in Hebrews where those who trusted God:

“... who through faith,
conquered kingdoms,
administered justice,...
who shut the mouths of lions,
quenched the fury of the flames,
and escaped the edge of the sword;
whose weakness was turned to strength;
and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.
Where women received back their dead, raised to life again.”

There was passion and energy and excitement as people really did believe that God could move mountains in their lives.

People were set free by God.

People did see amazing things happen.

People were healed both on the inside and out.

People were genuinely transformed by Jesus, of which I am one.

As I've share before but I think it bears repeating: I was painfully shy as a teenager. I mean I hated being in the spotlight (and still do to some degree). If an attractive girl talked to me I would go bright red. And the most tormenting aspect of high school were class speeches; standing in front of my peers undergoing a slow death inside.

But Jesus has a way of taking the most unlikely people and doing the extraordinary in their lives.

He took me and planted a seed in my life; being a pastor and standing in front of people teaching and preaching.

I've talked about this with friends – and perhaps it was just our perception (and perception is often wrong) – but the Christian life was portrayed as one high point to another, one triumph after the next.

If you just had that faith, if you trusted God enough, you could overcome anything, and you would be shielded from the harshness of the world around you.

But it had this unintended downside.

I quickly discovered that the Christian life is rarely that straight forward.

Have you found that?

It didn't prepare me for when acquaintances took their own lives even though they were committed Christians.

I didn't have framework for when good Godly people were diagnosed with terminal diseases, and despite the faithful prayers of God's people, they died.

It didn't explain the persistent nature of sin, the unrelenting assault of the demonic and consequent times of failure and feelings of defeat.

So what you can miss, or what I often missed, in amongst the amazing story of God called the Bible, was another side to faith.

The reading from Acts is often entitled "Peter's Miraculous Escape from Prison" which is accurate up to a point.

The first two verses though could be entitled, "James in Martyred".

To be executed by the sword meant that he was beheaded.

So James is decapitated but Peter is rescued by an angel.

James dies but Peter escapes.

What do you do with that?

Or Elisha, one of the great prophets of the Old Testament who followed in the footsteps of Elijah.

Elijah is translated up to heaven so what about Elisha.

Through Elisha God did some amazing things, including raising the dead.

But can anyone tell me how Elisha died?

Scripture simply states,

"Now Elisha had been suffering from the illness from which he died."
(2 Kings 13:14).

No miraculous healing. No angelic intervention. "Elisha died and was buried." (2 Kings 13:20).

A pastor once related the story of a woman who stood in church and breathlessly told of her two-year-old son who fell in a swimming pool, and was revived by artificial respiration, and recovered completely. 'Isn't God wonderful!' she exclaimed. To which we would reply "Amen!"

However, sitting in the congregation was another woman whose son also fell in a swimming pool, was pulled from the water, and never recovered.³

I mean what do you do with those stories?

"How do you explain these types of stories"

³ Philip Yancey, *Prayer* (London: Hodder, 2006), 253.

In Hebrews, after cataloguing the stories of exultant faith, we find another list:

“There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection.

Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.

They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated – the world was not worthy of them.

They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

[Then we read:]

These were all commended for their faith...”

Those who accomplished amazing feats and those who suffered and even died.

These were all commended for their faith – all of them.

So here’s where I’ve come to: Jesus calls us, I think, to be ambidextrous, to have two-handed faith; faith that trusts God for the astonishing and also trusts Him in the hurt.

Faith that takes hold of the hands that heal that are also the hands that are nail scarred.

This is faith that trusts God in the hurt and the hardship of life.

Faith in God that that holds on to God in the midst of pain and suffering, believing that somehow, somewhere, God is going to come through.

It shows itself in times when we *feel* like God has abandoned us, or we *feel* beyond God’s forgiveness; and yet we trust that we are forgiven and that God will never leave nor forsake us.

We trust that God is still God, and that we are still loved and cared for, even when miracles are absent.

And it shows itself often in real life.

We see too that Jesus knew what it was to feel the depth of the human condition. Jesus didn’t welcome suffering; He recoiled from it.

Yet he experienced rejection and exhaustion, misunderstanding and slander, violence, and towards His last moments, despair as He cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34).

Yet Jesus' last words on the Cross were "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." (Luke 23:46).

He has entered into solidarity with us, walks with us, and will eventually take us through it.

We can trust Jesus in our hurt because He too knows suffering.

So too close.

The first thing I would say is this:

The presence of faith does not mean the absence of suffering.

And the presence of suffering does not mean the absence of faith.

What you may not know is that the first Nepalese became a Christian in 1950.

Now the Church numbers more than a million, and Nepalese church leaders estimate that 80 per cent of converts have resulted from physical healings: a Christian prays for a sick neighbour who then gets well.

...European and American doctors who work there as missionaries... admit they have no scientific explanation for the amazing recoveries they have seen.

But alongside these, Christians in Nepal and China also tell horrific stories of oppression, imprisonment and torture.⁴

And so say, well what guarantee is there then?

Is it all just random?

Well, it's not random.

What God does sometimes, he doesn't do all the time.

What is guaranteed in response to faith is Himself.

And with himself comes his grace.

So for example, in the face of sickness, it may be that Jesus will give you the grace and power to be healed.

If he doesn't He can give the grace and power to endure.

And if it is terminal, Jesus can give you the grace and power to die well.

⁴ Yancey, *Prayer*, 231.

In my late teens my grandfather was diagnosed with cancer. At that time the youth group of which I was a part had a weekly prayer meeting and so we prayed for him. We prayed that Jesus would heal and that he would come to know Jesus. Shortly afterwards I received news that my grandfather's cancer had gone into remission. [And of course some people will say, what a coincidence – yet it's amazing how coincidences increase when people pray- but that's another sermon in itself.] It was during this time that grandfather attended a local church. There for the first time he met and came to know Jesus. Sadly his cancer returned and this time it was terminal. However in his remaining days and weeks, as his body grew weaker, his faith grew stronger to the point where he wrote his own eulogy. His opening words were (and I quote), "I am not afraid to say in front of my mates that I have accepted Jesus Christ as my Saviour."
