

Sermon by Venerable Susanna Pain
8 August 2010 Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16

I've just finished reading a book called "The Blasphemer" — subtitled "sometimes you have to believe to see" by Nigel Farndale. It's an exploration of faith really — in the search for reality.

The main protagonist, Daniel, is a nematologist and atheist. His God is science and the scientific method, but when he and his wife survive a plane crash, and he is saved by a figure he sees in the sea, he is driven to find an explanation of his experience.

Here is part of a dialogue between Daniel and his father, Philip, who he's never really got on with:

Philip says: 'I don't think I did feel fear. Not in the way some men do. I have seen men crying before going into battle. But some men felt immune from death, as if they had an antenna on their heads that was warning them of impending danger, keeping them safe.'

Daniel replies: 'That's what I felt when ... That's what I was trying to explain last night about ...'

He searched for the name but could not recall it.

'Martha's teacher. The Muslim guy. After the plane went down I was swimming for help and he appeared out of nowhere in the water and I felt like that he was keeping me safe. Like he was leading me to safety, pointing me in the right direction, towards the islands. I was hallucinating, of course. Had sunstroke and hypothermia. And I was dehydrated. All the symptoms. But ... am I making sense?'

Daniel felt in his jacket for the news cutting from the Trinity College student newspaper, the one with the photograph of himself and Hamdi sitting together in the refectory.

'Thought I had a picture of him. Must have left it upstairs.'

'You felt he was your guardian angel?'

Daniel wafted his hand and gave a dismissive laugh.

'For the ... No! Course not. I told you, I was hallucinating. I'd had a knock on the head during the crash and that might have caused temporal lobe epilepsy. There's this small shadow on my brain.'

Philip looked concerned. 'Why didn't you tell me?'

'Bruce has it in hand. Didn't want to worry you about it'

'I've had some experience of temporal lobe epilepsy. Did you have convulsions?'

'Not really. It was more like migraine. A blinding light.'

'And you haven't had that since?'

'I've had headaches. That's all.'

'You should have told me. I know some excellent neuro-surgeons. It's associated with out-of-body experiences and quasi-religious visions, you know.'

'I know.'

Philip hesitated. 'Have you considered that it might have been a genuine vision?'

'No such thing.'

'How you do know.'

'I'm a scientist, Dad. I know.'

'Yes but how do you know?'

Daniel took a sip of coffee. 'Never been any proof of them'

'Science cannot disprove them either.'

'Well, it can actually. If they are not testable according to the known law of physics and biology then —'

'Perhaps that is why God chose you.'

'Chose me!' Daniel laughed again, more edgily than before.

'Someone who knew the meaning of scientific proof. A Darwinist. A Darwinist in the Galapagos Islands.'

'You saying the Big Fella likes a challenge? Hadn't thought of it like that. I suppose life must get quite boring if you're a supreme being who can do anything he wants whenever he wants. Short of challenges, I suppose that's why he became so jealous and insecure. Demanding people worship him and no other. Smiting those who take his name in vain.'

Philip smiled with his eyes, a rare event. 'Careful, Daniel, you're talking about Him as if He exists.'

Daniel looked up at the sky, 'OK, Allah, Yahweh, whatever you like to be called, if you exist, give me a sign. Just one. Doesn't have to be an angel ... I promise, if you give me a sign right now I'll sacrifice my first born on the altar, as that seems to be what you get off on ...' He cocked his head.

'Nothing. No bolt of lightning. Not even a shooting star.'

"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

'That's from Hebrews, isn't it ... Surprised I know that? I read the Bible cover to cover when I was a student. Have to know your enemy. You taught me that.'

'Perhaps the evidence you seek has been with you all along and you can't see it, or you won't allow yourself to see it. Sometimes believing is seeing.'

'That's called superstition.'

'It's called faith.'

'Sometimes you have to believe to see.' At our Young Adults dinner on Friday Katherine gave a good example. She and a group of indigenous people had travelled five hours to Katherine in a bus for a conference. The leader of the group kept the keys the whole time. Kept them safe, so no one would take the bus illegally into town ... and, you guessed it, when they were about to leave, bags packed, tents cleaned and rolled up ... the keys were no where to be found.

They searched high and low, and began to get anxious. Then the Aboriginal leader suggested they pray. She got them to sit down in a circle, she quoted Hebrews then she prayed 'Lord, you know everything. You know where the keys are. We need to find them to get home. Please help us find them.' Again they looked.

Another member of the group suggested they unroll the leader's tent ... the tent that had already been swept out and packed. They unpacked the tent, and shook it and looked carefully. There, ticked in one corner, was they key!

Katherine said she was ecstatic and jumped for joy. You could say they would have found it eventually. But Katherine chooses to believe that God helped somehow.

That is faith. Sometimes you have to believe to see. The community still tell that story, and it sustains them somehow.

Katherine sees faith as a gift.

It is important to question, sure, to bring your intellect and reason ...

Faith is a complex thing (Asking questions is okay but in the end after gathering evidence and testing hypothesis one has to just trust until proven wrong?)

The conversation in the story continues:

'Sorry, Dad, but faith isn't enough. I know this table exists'

Daniel lowered his head to the table and mimed banging it repeatedly. 'I don't have to believe it exists as an act of faith.'

'You always say religion is for closed minds, but I think the opposite. I think it's for open minds. Minds that are open to the possibility of there being something more, something we can't explain.'

'Sorry, Dad, but it's just not true. We know how a child is conceived, to take an obvious example, and that knowledge allows us to dismiss the idea of a virgin birth.'

'What about IVF?'

Daniel gave a forced grin. 'OK. You got me there. The Resurrection then. We know that didn't happen because we know how life and death work. If Jesus was alive three days after coming down off the cross it was because he was still alive. He never died. He slipped into a coma. I don't suppose there were too many trained medics on hand with thermometers, sphygmomanometers and watches to check for vital signs. Look, we know he didn't come back to life because coming back to life is a biological impossibility.'

'Perhaps that was the point. Perhaps it had to be something impossible, something that mankind would take notice of and still be talking about two thousand years after it happened.'

There was a loud clink as Daniel slammed his coffee cup down in its saucer. 'Dad! You're a doctor! How can you say that?'

'I can say it because I believe in God.'

I have told you again and again of my dream for this place — the vision I have seen, and believe. I see a community that has faith in God, and offers hospitality and the opportunity to grow; a place of beauty and creativity inclusive of young, old, differing abilities, different ethnic ... and sexual orientations; a community who reaches out to neighbours and beyond in love and speaks out for justice, and against oppression.

This dream takes time to come to fruition. It is a work in progress, built on faith and hope and love by followers of Jesus the Christ.

Slowly and surely, this sign of God's way, sign of the presence of God's spirit, is slowly and surely, this vision is being realised — we are growing into it by faith.

Abraham and Sarah stepped out in faith, believing, looking forward. Leaving behind riches and comfort to walk with their God. They believed that even though they were well past it, children would be born. There would be a home for them.

They walked one step at a time, together in Faith. Seeking to follow, to trust. The path was not always easy or straight forward, often there were surprises and setbacks but they kept going.

This is what we are doing, too, at Holy Covenant. Many years ago, before I was here, Linda McMinn, the Rector, and the Outreach Team dreamed of a Neighbourhood Centre. They dreamed of a Holistic Care Nurse. They explored the concept, and applied for funding. They were knocked back.

They kept researching, talking with the community, attending seminars, reading, engaging a Social Work student to do a needs analysis on this area — attempting to understand how we might best serve our local community. The team talked with Anne Ranse, because of her interest in aged care. They talked to Elizabeth MacKinlay because of her research into spirituality and ageing.

Then last year on January 6th, Harris Boulton, Gwen Hallows, Neville Hurst, Elizabeth MacKinlay, Anne Ranse and I met at Ricardos to talk about the way forward. Anne was excited, but sitting on her hands. She was so excited because she felt called to volunteer for the position of holistic care nurse – a pioneer position in this Diocese.

She prayed about it and everywhere the signs pointed in that direction. We were thrilled as we were unable to pay someone at this stage.

We then received a grant from Anglicare — not for a salary, but to set up the programme — and Anne began working voluntarily unpaid one day per week.

She began getting referrals from the hospital, from the community, and began building up a team of volunteers around her. Recently it became apparent that we could do with a bus to transport some of our clients, especially those in wheelchairs.

The prayer chain prayed for this to happen. Anne spoke with some people, and our prayers were answered ... much quicker this time — we now have access to buses from Ginninderra Gardens for Rainbow Fellowship, Community Lunches and specific activities — Yes! We continue to walk in faith.

It is all very exciting. Through Anne and her team we are able to offer Holistic Care, beginning in a very small way to serve our community — someone in need of gardening support, a refugee family with small children needing care, a woman in supported accommodation needing social support, a parishioner needing wisdom and understanding to clarify her medical situation. Someone else needing help with a dressing, a blood pressure check, health advice ... the list goes on.

On the smell of an oily rag, in faith, and hope and love, we are turning into this dream. We thank God for the Outreach Team's perseverance, for Anne's vision and energy.

I invite you to look around you at so many examples of faithful witness in your personal history and in the history of this community. Be encouraged ... for the assurance you need to keep hoping and believing in God's way.

Faith is a dynamic thing. It is about choice, about will, not emotion.

We are each challenged to reflect on our personal call, to build on the past, to stand on the shoulders of our forebears in faith for the sake of the future by living faithfully.

Hebrews 11:1 Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Faith is active, not a passive waiting. (SOS p196) Acting as if it is true.

In Isaiah 1:1,10-20 'God calls the people to just and righteous living. Learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (SOS p96) 'Such faith is not just a personal experience, it is the work of a community that lives with fidelity to God's ways'.

Hebrews 11 places faith on a continuum that suggests it is dynamic and always growing — but it is not linear — sometimes we have to let go of false Gods and false images of God, as we grow and letting go can leave us in a vulnerable place.

It is challenging sometimes to wait, to trust, to take a long view, and remain patient and hopeful.

Yet that is my invitation to you ... have faith in God
trust and be unafraid ...

Lean on God, the God of Jesus and God's Spirit will be with you, I believe.
For some might need to quote scripture and say —
'Lord I believe, help my unbelief.'

And God believes in us too!