

Faithfulness

(Luke 2: 22-40)

The Gospel reading for this morning presents to us two stories of faithfulness. There is the faithfulness of Mary and Joseph in bringing Jesus up according to the Law of Moses. There is faithfulness of Simeon and Anna who year after year looked for the coming of the Lord's promised Messiah. Here Luke has presented us a story of ordinary people living faithfully before God and one another.

When the question asked today - Why should I be faithful? The answer sometimes given is contrary to the example set for us in Luke. Faithfulness in marriage is continuing to decline as recent census results show us. Only one in five Canadians who have married are still married to their first spouse. Employers commitment to employees has also changed. Two generations ago it would not have been uncommon for a man to be with the same company for his entire career. Now many people have to change companies or even types of employment three or four times during their working years. These are but two examples that come to mind.

So let us reflect on the faithfulness of the people we read about this morning and think about what their examples can teach us.

Let's begin with Mary & Joseph. After the shepherds are gone Mary & Joseph have a son to rear - and their religious obligations to keep. They were not distracted from their religious obligations to the Law of Moses, despite all the supernatural events leading up to Jesus' birth.

Through the guidance of his parents Mary & Joseph, Jesus' life in infancy and childhood was characterized as being in full obedience to the law of Moses. Jesus was to undergo three ancient ceremonies of which all Jewish boys underwent.

Firstly - circumcision on the eighth day.

Secondly - every firstborn male was sacred to God, and was designated as holy to the Lord.

Thirdly - there was a purification after childbirth.

Jesus' parents did not think just because Mary had found favour with God and had

brought Jesus into the world that they did not have to be faithful and observe the Laws. God was important to them and they were determined to pass on their faith.

Luke also speaks of an old man named Simeon - a good and pious man. Luke tells us Simeon was a righteous and devout man who was looking forward to the consolation of Israel and that the Holy Spirit rested upon him. It had been revealed to Simeon by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Holy Spirit, Simeon went into the Temple that day and when Mary & Joseph entered with Jesus, Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God.

Luke also tells of an old lady Anna - a prophet. She had been widowed for many years, and never left the Temple but worshiped, prayed and fasted night and day. And at this time Anna began to praise God and speak about the young child Jesus.

Here are three stories of faithfulness. The adjective faithful is of course related to the word faith. Faith is defined in the dictionary as complete trust or confidence. To be faithful is to remain loyal and steadfast.

Christian faith is a living thing, and means taking God's word as literally true. We are called to proclaim with boldness and confidence in our worship and witness our faith and faithfulness. Mary & Joseph, Simeon & Anna all proclaimed by action and word God's faithfulness.

We have seen over the past months and weeks how the society in which we live tries to take away the importance of the true meaning of Christmas. How many would like to take the Christ out of Christmas.

During 2003 we Christians need to hold firm to our faith, and be motivated and called into committed discipleship because we have been touched by the Christmas Gospel which opens our hearts to respond to Jesus with faith and faithfulness.

In order for us to live faithfully we need the Holy Spirit to fill our lives with His presence. When this happens we can live as faithful, committed disciples. Such faithfulness will be shaped by how we answer these four questions: '1) Am I willing to listen, 2) Am I willing to learn; 3) Am I willing to serve; 4) Am I willing to share my life in open & honest fellowship with others?'

Please notice that each of these questions has the verb “willing” as the governing action. Faithfulness can never be forced upon us but is an act of our will. As we make the choice to live faithfully by reflecting on these four questions and applying them to our lives we will become more committed disciples.

The first question - “Am I willing to listen?”

Proverbs 3: ‘Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.’

Our most important means of guidance is humble prayer. We need to come to God, acknowledging that we lack wisdom and that His way is not our way. We need not only to talk to God in prayer, but be still and listen to what He speaks to us. Also to listen to what God speaks to us through His word the scriptures and mature Christians. Listening helps us to grow and mature, it can help to keep us accountable. The book of Proverbs in the Old Testament shares wisdom regarding listening.

In Proverbs 2: My child listen to me ..Then you will know the right course of action to take every time. - Listening is essential to making good decisions.

Proverbs 8: Listen to me ! For I have excellent things to tell you. Listening keeps us from having closed mind. Listening shows respect to others. It honours the words of others.

The second question - “Am I willing to learn?”

2 Timothy 2: And these things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses, entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.

We all need the encouragement of others who are also learning to be disciples. We can learn a great deal from the successes and failures of others.

Small group Bible studies, Fellowship groups are all great ways of sharing our walk of the faith, the highs and the lows. Today we need more mature Christians to encourage others to grow as disciples.

So here is the third question:

Am I willing to serve ?

Jesus was the light of the World - In Matthew 5: Jesus says to His followers ‘You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on a stand, and it gives light to everyone

in the house. In the same way let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.' This illustration from Jesus does not mean we should go around boasting our behaviour. Rather, as we follow Jesus' in the way we live, we will naturally stand out in contrast to society around us.

This way we will help others to see the way to God. When the mother of James and John came and asked Jesus that her sons have the top places in Jesus' kingdom, Jesus told her and his disciples that in His kingdom the greatest would be be the servant of all; and at the last supper demonstrated this principle by taking the job of the lowest slave and washing His disciples' feet. By nature we humans are selfish. So when a disciple of Jesus performs a loving act of service even if we have not said a word - it can be a witness for Jesus as it shapes our hearts to be more like His.

The fourth question is: 'Am I willing to share my life in open & honest fellowship with others?'

One of the weaknesses in the Church today can be individualism - "I do my own thing, as I feel led.

But the quality , depth and unity of a Christian fellowship is very important. Christ works through His body the Church, and the Holy Spirit gives gifts to that body for the good of all. So together the body joined together - builds itself up in love.

God uses other members of the Body of Christ to meet our needs, just as if we are willing He can use us to meet the needs of others. And among the things He can use, are our words - which need to be full of grace - and our genuine care for our brother or sister.

Being a faithful, disciple of Christ is not something we can do alone. We all need the encouragement of others who are learning to be disciples themselves. We can learn a lot from the successes and failures of our fellow brothers & sisters.

Being faithful in some cases has a cost. Many of Jesus' disciples and close followers died for their obedience to Him. Being a faithful disciple of Jesus is never easy, and many times brings us into situations of what we would like to do - but is in conflict of others.

It cannot have been easy for Mary & Joseph, Simeon or Anna to continue their faithfulness with the situations around their lives.

Being faithful and following Jesus is - like being on a journey. At the beginning we

are far from perfect followers of Jesus Christ. But just like a journey, following Jesus is something that takes time. We may make mistakes, we can take a wrong turn but if we are patient we will grow and mature. As Jesus was patient with His first disciples, He is patient with us today.

All He asks is “ Are we willing to be faithful and follow Him?” as we are willing to listen, learn, serve & share our lives with each other.