

In my pockets this morning I have a set of keys, they open most of the doors in this church, the office and even some in the hall. In my handbag I have another set of keys; they start my car, and open my house. In my house I have lots of other keys, they start other cars even some we no longer own, they open other houses too (yes, we managed to leave places with a set of house keys, but shhhhhh, don't tell anyone), we have keys that open lots of other things too, and we even have some which we have no idea what they open. Keys are an important part of our everyday life; our lives are, to varying degrees, controlled by keys. Today's readings are also about keys, or more precisely one special key. That key is faith. But faith is one of those tricky words we all use, but we don't all necessarily mean the same thing, and sometimes we can even mean different things ourselves, depending on the situation.

In our first reading, Elijah is upset that the people of Israel were not always worshiping God; they were worshipping Ba'al at the same time. They had decided to have an 'each way' bet, if they couldn't get it from one, they would try the other. So Elijah decides to do a test. Our reading today misses the bit where the people are invited to set up their sacrifice to Ba'al without putting fire to it, then they are to call on their god and see if their god answers with fire, and Elijah will do the same and whose ever god answers is the true god. Needless to say, Ba'al did not answer, despite them 'limping around' for many hours pleading for a response. So Elijah prepares his bull for sacrifice, but he doesn't just place it on the altar, no, he drenches it in water, and more water, and still more water. Then he just says to God, "Lord, answer me, and they will know that you are God". And fire came upon the sacrifice and it, the wood, even the stones, were consumed as well as the water. Now I don't know about you, but I think it takes a great deal of assuredness to know that you can absolutely drench something to the core of its being and still get it to catch fire. It shouts of more than belief, it shouts of a total 'oneness' with God, it shouts of that special key - faith. Elijah did not 'believe' it would happen, he had faith it would happen. Faith, not belief. And there is a difference. Belief is based on a rational assessment of likelihood and probability, and quite frankly there was no likelihood and zero probability that the sacrifice would catch fire after being drenched like that. Faith doesn't care about probability or likelihood, it just trusts in the unexpected, it trusts that the unexplainable will happen just because you asked God for it. Faith means to be in a God-initiated relationship, even if we are not aware of it, a relationship which is shown by our actions. Elijah's faith was the key that unlocked the power of God.

Let me ask you, When is it hardest for us to have faith? If we want something which is reasonably easy to achieve, and it is not at all 'out of the ordinary' for it to occur, is it hard to have faith that it will occur? What about if what we want is actually pretty 'out there' and totally unusual for it to occur, can we still have faith that it will occur, or do we just 'write it off' as a pipe dream and not even try to hope or ask for it to occur?

The Centurion had a very sick servant whom he cared about very much, in fact he loved him and because he loved him he wanted him to be made well. He had heard stories about this man Jesus, but he had never met him. He sent some of his workers, other Jews; to fetch Jesus so he could make the servant well – unexpected event no1. Now although this man was probably a Roman, but was definitely not a Jew, he appears to like Jews, he has helped build their synagogue –unexpected event no2. Jesus agrees to go to see the servant – unexpected event no3. While on the way, the Centurion

sends more people, his friends, to say 'I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, just send your word that my servant will be healed and that will be enough – unexpected event no4. Jesus is blown away by the faith of the Centurion – unexpected event no 5. That is a lot of unexpected events, and probably the most unexpected is the Centurion's faith that Jesus not only could but that he would, perform a 'long-range miracle' and heal his servant. The Centurion was willing to use his key and ask for what he wanted.

The words spoken by this Centurion are reflected in a prayer used by some Christian traditions just after the invitation to Communion, 'Father I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed'. These words, spoken by a non Jew to a Jew he has never even met, say more than 'I believe you can heal him', they say, 'I trust that you can do this, I have faith that my servant will be healed'. And there is something to be learned in the surprise of Jesus at the level of this man's faith, even the unlikely, the outsider, can surprise us and respond to the call of Jesus in their lives. God is so very often the God of the unexpected, especially when it comes to grace.

Desmond Tutu once said "We are only the light bulbs, and our job is just to remain screwed in". Faith does not mean we see what is ahead, see the future clearly. Faith is a relationship with God, and because of that relationship we have trust. Faith is also contagious. It requires that we keep on keeping on, and because we do, we become a light for others. That is what it means to remain 'screwed in' to God. The Centurion was a light for all those who were in his house and those who were with Jesus. All of them witnessed this man's faith, and all them saw that this faith was well placed. We should not be surprised by what we see around us and who we see responding to God's message. Faith can show up in the most unexpected places, and no matter how well you think you know what is going on, there is always room for the same surprise that Jesus felt. God's message and love and grace is on offer for all people, no matter who they are, where they come from and what their background may be. All three of today's readings have, in them, a message of inclusion of strangers in the household of faith, acceptance of aliens and outsiders into the community of Christ. God is a loving and including God, all nations, all genders, all races of people are welcome in God's temple, God's house, God's community, God's church. Many people in our community are 'screwed in'; we just need to be open to seeing their light, and to being 'screwed in' ourselves that others may see our light too.

Our gospel has many things to tell us. God is very often the God of the unexpected. Faith is the key that unlocks the power of God. When we are desperate, it doesn't matter how far away from God we feel, help is only a prayer away. If we feel unworthy of God's presence in our lives, we can ask a friend to support us and pray with us. We don't have to do anything or go anywhere to experience the saving presence of God's love – we just have to be ready to ask and have faith that Christ's word always accomplishes what it sets out to do. And sometimes that accomplishment can surprise us so completely that, when we see its effect, in often unexpected ways, we know we are standing on holy ground. "We are only the light bulbs, our job is just to remain screwed in".