

KEEPING THE FAITH

A Sermon preached at Pusey House, Oxford

Ecclesiasticus xxxv.12–17 2 Timothy iv: 6-8, 16-18 Luke xviii.9-14 (NRSV)

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 2 Timothy iv.7

It is a joy and a blessing to be with you this morning, in a place where the faith has been kept, taught, cherished and shared since its foundation. Thank you for inviting me to be with you.

A culturally relevant question for you. What do the film *Blazing Saddles*, the American rock band Bon Jovi, and Oldham Athletic Football Club have in common? While you're puzzling round that one, let me add to the list Michael Jackson and a film starring Harry Lennox and Vanessa Williams?

The answer is that all of them have, at some time or other, found recourse to the words 'Keep the Faith.' They occur in film and song titles, advertising campaigns, motivational addresses, and a whole host of other places. As such, they can refer to 'faith' in a whole variety of contexts. In each case, it implies a stability – a standing where you have been placed, even when that place is not one of your own choosing. Paul, in this morning's epistle, offers a summary of his own earthly life – his own sense of relief, almost, that he has done all he can to respond to his meeting with the Jesus he had encountered, those years ago, on the road to Damascus.

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

As a consequence, Paul looks forward, to the reward which his keeping the faith will elicit.

From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

Faith, of course, is a gift from God, and keeping the faith that we are given is an essential. Such an imperative impacts upon every aspect of our living, in both public and personal spheres. Whilst it is true that keeping the faith involves the fairly obvious virtues of perseverance and fidelity, there is another area which is perhaps less obvious – that of growth, because only by growing in faith can we hope to keep it. As you can see from my well-sculpted physique, honed over years of punishing exercise and trappist self-denial, I am a great one for the gym. Well, that's nearly true – I am a great one for gym *membership*. I was in one long enough to read the sign on the door which said '*Fitness can only be gained and maintained. It cannot be stored*'. We are also told, whilst on our fitness kick, that we should have five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. No one would dream of having thirty-five portions on a Sunday, to see them through the week. The same is somewhat true of faith. We think of having a 'repository of faith' but the truth is, it has to be exercised, practiced, daily, if it is to be kept. Prayer, sacraments, fellowship, caritas, discipleship with Jesus rather than mere admiration of him. Keeping the faith means never standing still in our relationships with God and with one another. You want to keep the faith? Practice it, daily.

Generally, when we 'keep' something, there is a feeling that we are preserving and protecting it, because it is precious to us, and we don't want it damaged or falling into the wrong hands. So, 'keeping the faith' carries with it overtones of retrenchment, consolidation, holding on grimly to

what you have, as if we can form some kind of citadel around it. Part of the Christian paradox is that to keep the faith we must share it – striving to find ways of communicating the Catholic faith in this generation, living lives of radical and distinctive love in the face of often overwhelming indifference. That process begins here at the Mass, as we are filled with God’s grace through this moment of unspeakable holiness. It is this grace which gives us the power to live as Christ’s servants at all, and to live out that life of joy in the social, intellectual and spiritual maelstrom which Oxford can be. But in the living of that life, keeping the faith consists not simply in the living but in the sharing – the thought that what we receive here is too good, too valuable, too rich to keep it to ourselves. And if the challenges and difficulties for the Catholic faith in the present day seem too much for us, we need to recall that it is at times like this that keeping the faith actually matters, and matters not only for the sake of our own souls but for the souls of generations as yet unborn. We here in Oxford look back to various martyrs – Ridley and Latimer, of course, just outside the front door, and Roman Catholics Nichols, Yaxley, Belson and Pritchard, and no doubt others who chose their historical period less wisely. They – and countless others – have endured far, far worse, in concentration camps and prisons, like Paul himself – murdered by soldiers and monarchs, executed by the people they were sent to serve and to whom they proclaimed the gospel. It was, in their own place and time, the consequence of keeping the faith. Their memory, as much as their prayers for us now, sustains us, reminding us that it is possible to live to the exacting words of Christ in ages of darkness and difficulty. To spend time wishing that things were different is tempting, but utterly futile. When I attempted, at the age of six, to reject the bowl of prunes put in front of me for my school dinner, Mrs. Porter the dinner lady came out with that classic northern line ‘You get what you’re given.’ It’s as true of the time in which you live, just as it was true of the unpromising and dangerous times in which Jesus lived. Our task is to witness and serve in the time we are given, not to wish for any golden ages, mythical or otherwise.

There is a bigger, wider challenge to those of us who are concerned for the mission of the church and the coming of the kingdom. To those who would live in a faithless, Godless world, faith is a dangerous thing. It challenges the assumption that humans can be self-sufficient and self-serving. The politically correct world which humanism would espouse would be a desolate and monochrome world indeed – a far cry from the life in abundance which Jesus Christ offers. It is a world warned against by (amongst others) Pope John Paul II in the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (1995). Commenting on unwelcome developments in the field of medical ethics, he wrote

the eclipse of the sense of God and of man, typical of a social and cultural climate dominated by secularism, which, with its ubiquitous tentacles, succeeds at times in putting Christian communities themselves to the test. Those who allow themselves to be influenced by this climate easily fall into a sad vicious circle: when the sense of God is lost, there is also a tendency to lose the sense of man, of his dignity and his life...

If we lose God, we lose our true selves. John Paul’s successor, Benedict XVI spoke eloquently last month of this concern in Westminster when reminding us

not only the rights of believers to freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, but also the legitimate role of religion in the public square. I would invite all of you, therefore, within your respective spheres of influence, to seek ways of promoting and encouraging dialogue between faith and reason at every level of national life.

It remains to be seen whether these words can inspire a confidence leading to a renewed dialogue going beyond personal gesture or statement, but impacting on the wider fabric of society. If we would keep the faith it's important that the place of that faith is re-affirmed, and that will only happen if those of us who hold it live it, not in any pharisaic or pompous fashion but after the manner of our tax-collector – in penitence and humility, whilst firmly and courteously challenging the *zeitgeist* which claims that there is no place for faith in the public arena.

Keeping the faith matters – not only personally, but corporately, visibly, meaningfully. May this great gift continue to sustain, provoke and drive us onwards to the glory of the Kingdom, moving mountains and shaping hearts, minds and lives, until Christ is all in all.

DAMIAN FEENEY
Vice Principal, St. Stephen's House

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