

*Genesis 17: 1-8, 15-22*

*Romans 4: 13-25*

*Mark 8: 31-38*

When I was at school, I remember a teacher telling the class one day during a wide-ranging discussion that, "I'm not afraid of dying, but the cause of death does give me concern." The man was a Christian, and I can see his point. It is all very well having the hope of life eternal, but it's getting there that can be a bit of a worry.

We are but human and not to think about the manner of our passing with the occasional troubled thought is exceptional indeed. But consider the alternative. Not to have the faith, the belief that Christ will be waiting for us to lead us into eternal life with him, is much worse.

Easter means that the Resurrection of Christ has removed the terror of death and enabled us to face it with equanimity. Of course, not everyone can approach death in the spirit of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. "When the day that he must go hence was come, many accompanied him to the riverside, into which as he went, he said, "Death, where is thy sting?"

And as he went down deeper, he said, "Grave, where is thy victory?" So he passed over and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side."

Nobody knows for certain what faces us "on the other side." In a sense, we do not need to know. After all, we didn't know what life would be like in this world when we lay in our mother's womb.

Just as there is a period of gestation prior to our entry into this world, we may look upon this life as a kind of gestation for the next.

Well, that is a point of view, but not, I feel, wholly convincing. When we were in the womb, we didn't have rational thought or possess feelings, as we know it. There was

no choice in the matter, it just happened. It could be argued that we have no choice about death; we can't escape or avoid it. It will happen to us sooner or later. One of the things I say at a funeral service is that "Death is part of life." Well, that is undeniable. All of us will die. It could be argued that we have a degree of choice in the way we die, but we have no choice in the fact that we will die.

Life is about choices. One of God's gifts to us is the freedom to choose.

Another choice we have is whether or not, to believe the promises of God. Our passage in Romans said that Abraham believed in the God who calls the dead into life and who brings into being even things which have no existence at all. This is an outstanding example of Abraham's willingness to take God at his word. The promise was given to Abraham when he was an old man. I mean, the idea that a son would be born to a man of 100 and his wife of 90 must have seemed ludicrous to say the least. But Abraham took God at his word and once again, it was this faith that was accounted to Abraham for righteousness.

For me, the crux of the Abraham story was his willingness to take God at his word and it was this faith that was accounted to Abraham for righteousness.

In other words, it was this willingness to take God at his word, which put Abraham into a right relationship with him. The same applies to us. It is not the works of the law; it is a trusting faith, which establishes the relationship between God, and us, which ought to be the case.

Abraham believed that God could make the impossible possible. Easier said than done, some of us may be saying. It's hard to trust God sometimes, isn't it? I heard a story that illustrates that point.

A man fell off a cliff but managed to grab a tree limb on the way down. The following conversation ensued: "Is anyone up there?" "I am here. I am the Lord. Do you believe me?" "Yes Lord, I believe. I really believe, but I can't hang on much longer."

“That’s all right, if you really believe you have nothing to worry about, let go of the branch.” A moment of pause, then: “Is there anyone else up there?”

If we believe everything depends on our efforts, we are bound to be pessimists, for experience has taught us the grim lesson that our own efforts can achieve very little. When we realise that it is not our effort but God’s grace and power which matter, then we become optimists, because we are bound to believe that with God, nothing is impossible.

Ann Hunter Small, who was a great missionary teacher, had a favourite saying. She used to say, “A church which is alive dares to do anything.” That daring only becomes possible to a person and to people within a church when they take God at his word. That means trust or faith.

It means believing in Jesus and his promises. “I go to prepare a place for you.” “Because I live, you will live also,” promises Jesus. And he has kept his promises by rising from the dead. He showed the same confidence in the power of God who brings the dead to life as he did when he raised his friend Lazarus before the eyes of the crowd.

“He is raised from the dead” means that Christ has been through it all before us – literally to hell and back.

During the terrible days of the Blitz, a father, holding his small son by the hand, ran from a building that had been struck by a bomb. In the front yard was a shell hole. Seeking shelter as quickly as possible, the father jumped into the hole and held up his arms for his son to follow. Terrified, yet hearing his father’s voice telling him to jump, the boy replied, “I can’t see you!”

The father, looking up against the sky tinted red by the burning buildings, called to the silhouette of his son, “But I can see you. Jump!” The boy jumped, because he trusted his father.

The Christian faith enables us to face life or meet death, not because we can see, but with the certainty we are seen; not that we know all the answers, but that we are known.

Can we take Jesus at his word? Does he seem to be credible with you? No one can prove the resurrection anymore than we can prove the existence of God. Yet many have trusted in God and his word and found him not to be wanting. That initial step of faith can seem difficult, but if you ask anyone who has taken it, the only regret they may have, is that they didn't do it sooner. Amen