

Over these three Sundays the theme for our talks has been, 'cultivating faithfulness.' We have seen that faithfulness begins with the orientation of our hearts being persistently aligned with the things of God. Such orientation requires careful attention to God's voice.

Jesus summed it up by saying, a person does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. Such a diet requires a determination, a discipline; working hard hand in hand with God and his energy at work in us. That's what happens when we co-operate with the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Pray

*Father in Heaven we need the Spirit's help to transform our knowledge of you into godly character, to make us to hear your voice above the noise and clamour of other voices, and to shape our lives with faithful confidence in your love and eternal purposes. Speak to each of us this morning, as we need to hear that we may be encouraged in our walk with you. Amen*

In the reading from Acts 20 this morning, in which Paul speaks to the elders of the church of Ephesus about his time amongst them, there is just one phrase that stands out in the context of our theme: "I declare today that I have been faithful."

We may be awestruck by Paul's credentials, his schooling, his citizenship, his calling by the Lord Jesus and his exploits, and as a result believe that he is too much of a giant in faith to be our model of faithfulness. But before you disqualify yourself please note that it is Jesus who qualifies all of us as his ambassadors.

There are two ideas that can cause confusion in the church today and hold us all back from exercising our calling as disciples of Jesus.

The first is the idea that someone's spiritual maturity is connected to how much they know and believe about God's Word. It's as if right belief - or orthodoxy - is a good measure of someone's faith.

The second is the idea that the ability to lead in the church requires theological training before anyone can exercise a ministry. We act collectively as if competent knowledge - is a good measure of someone's ability to serve.

The problem with the first idea - relying on orthodoxy - or *right belief* is that Satan, himself, knows more scripture than any human. God's Word, in James 2:19, says – "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that--and shudder."

A better measure of someone's spiritual maturity is orthopraxy, that's *right practice*.

We should be much more concerned with faithfulness in obeying and sharing than measuring maturity based only on what we know.

The problem with the second idea - that someone must be fully trained before they lead is that no one is ever fully trained.

Jesus modelled sending out young leaders, who still had many things to learn, to do some of the most important work in the Kingdom.

In Matthew 10 and Luke 9 - Jesus called together his twelve apostles and gave them complete power over all demons and diseases. Then he sent them to tell about God's kingdom and to heal the sick.

These men were sent before Peter shared his belief that Jesus was Saviour - something we'd consider a first step of faith. And even after being sent Jesus rebuked Peter multiple times for mistakes and Peter would still later deny Jesus, completely. Other followers argued over who was the greatest and what role each would play in God's future Kingdom.

They all still had a lot to learn but Jesus put them to work sharing what they already knew having seen what Jesus did. How important it is that we give testimony to what and where we see God at work. It might be simply in an email with a non-believer, as I did this week.

Faithfulness - more than knowledge - is something that can start as soon as someone begins to follow Jesus. Maturity is time-dependent, but faithfulness can be demonstrated at any and every point in a disciple's life.

If we are to cultivate faithfulness in these days it is that kind of quality that's needed in the liminal space between what we depended on in society, as well as in our life as church, and what new space the Lord will lead us into by his grace. It requires, of most of us, a shift in our thinking so that we trust, not in our own abilities but in the as yet unseen presence of God in a new reality, in which God has promised to be with us. At this time can we ask God to give us that fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22f) that is faithfulness?

Faithfulness does not mean that we will be perfect. It does not mean that we won't struggle or that we won't make poor decisions. It does mean that we will continue to trust in God and try to follow His commandments even when life is difficult.

God's faithfulness to His people is not the same as our faithfulness to God. When God is faithful to us, He cares for us, He leads us, and He loves us without condition if we will put our trust in him.

When we're faithful to God it means that we trust that He will care for us, we follow where He leads, and we love Him in return. Being faithful also means that there will be some evidence of our faith in God. A faithful Christian will produce fruit.