

26 February 2017

Once upon a time, there was a torrential downpour on the Kapiti Coast. The Waikanae River burst its banks. Waikanae, Otaihanga, and Paraparaumu Beach were beset by sudden flooding. And a very religious man found himself becoming trapped. As the waters began lapping around his deck, his neighbour came by in a dinghy and said, "The waters will soon reach you. Get in and I'll row you to safety."

"No, thank you," replied the religious man. "I've prayed to God, and I'm sure he will save me." The neighbour needed to save himself, so he rowed away without him.

The waters continued to rise, so the man went upstairs. And when the waters were coming up to meet him, a Civil Defence team came by in a motor boat, and said, "The waters will soon reach you. Get in and we'll take you to safety."

"No, thank you," replied the religious man. "I've prayed to God, and I'm sure he will save me." The Civil Defence team had other people to rescue, so they too went away without him.

The waters rose even higher, and soon the only place for the man to take refuge was on his roof. And as the waters rose over the guttering, a Westpac Rescue Helicopter arrived, and lowered one of its crew on a wire, who said, "The waters will soon reach you. Put on this harness, and we'll fly you to safety."

“No, thank you,” replied the religious man. “I’ve prayed to God, and I’m sure he will save me.” It was too dangerous for the helicopter crew to wait for the man for him to change his mind, so they flew away without him.

The waters continued to rise until the highest point of the roof was engulfed. And the religious man drowned.

When he arrived at heaven, he demanded that St Peter arrange an urgent meeting with God, and soon he found himself face to face with the Almighty.

“Lord, why am I here?” he asked. “I prayed for you to rescue me. I trusted you to save me from that flood. And you let me down.”

God took a deep breath. “I sent you a dingy,” he began. “But you refused to get in.”

“Then I sent you a motor boat,” he continued. “And again, you refused to get in.”

“Finally, I sent you a helicopter,” God concluded. “And you still refused to get in. What more did you want me to do?”¹

Various versions exist of this story. I am sure many of you will have heard at least one of them. And I was reminded of these stories while I was reflecting on the text of today’s reading from the Gospel according to St Matthew. The text is from a collection of sayings of Jesus popularly known as ‘The Sermon on the Mount’. And its message is pretty straightforward. Jesus tells us how we should not

worry, because we can trust God to look after us. If God will feed the birds of the air, and clothe the lilies of the field, then surely God will feed and clothe us when we are worth so much more?

So should we just have faith and not worry?

Well it's not quite that simple.

The Oxford Living Dictionary defines faith as, "Complete trust or confidence in someone or something," and "Strong belief in the doctrines of a religion, based on spiritual conviction rather than proof".² And I would say these are pretty adequate descriptions of what people would generally consider faith to mean. But I also feel the popular understanding of faith is a little lacking. And I see two particular issues with it.

Firstly, faith requires action. I expect you will all have been told at some stage that it is through our faith in Jesus we are set free, and that it is only faith, not our works that really matter. But in reality, the two it clear the two cannot be separated. Faith is not a passive state that requires no action on our part. As the Letter of St James so unequivocally puts it:

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

¹⁸But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith. ¹⁹You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder.³

If we want to be what claim to be when we say we are followers of Jesus, our faith must be put into practice. Pope Francis once said, "You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. That is how prayer works."⁴ So we can pray for the sick. But we should also help ensure they have access to proper health care. We can pray for the homeless. But we should help them find shelter. We can pray for those who are in prison. But we should also visit them.

And people like the man in the story can pray for God to save them when they are in need. But they should not fail to take up the offer when a rescue initiative when it comes their way.

The other key issue with the popular understanding of faith is the misconception that it requires absolute and unquestioning belief. A friend once spoke of how her sister had fallen ill and died when they were children. Their family's minister had visited with a faith healer, and prayed for her. And when the little girl failed to recover, the minister told the grieving family the little girl did not get better because somebody in the house did not have enough faith.

But real faith allows us to ask questions, and even to have doubts. Otherwise it is not faith, but blind acceptance. And I would suggest it is not possible to fully engage with one's faith without ever experiencing some kind of crisis of faith. Consider the anguish Jesus experiences at Gethsemane, and how he throws himself on the

ground, praying that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him.⁵ Perhaps more than at any other time in his life, we Jesus see as being fully human as well as fully divine.

We will have doubts and questions at times during our lives. Especially when we are faced with trials and tragedies. We would not be human if we did not. But when we accept our doubts and questions, instead trying to suppress them, only then can we truly learn to trust God to provide everything we need.

But God is not a vending machine. And we have to do some of the work for ourselves.

Darryl Ward

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<http://theword.tk>

¹ Adapted from 'I Sent You a Rowboat' <https://storiesforpreaching.com/i-sent-you-a-rowboat/>

² <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/faith>

³ James 2:14-19

⁴ <http://www.inspiringquotes.us/author/3767-pope-francis>

⁵ Mark 14:35