

## **Pako Evening Service: 25/10/16**

Scripture Readings: Rom 10:1-17; John 6:35-51; Message: "From where comes our faith?"

Congregation, as Christians we profess that it is by faith alone that we share in Christ alone and all his blessings. But where does our faith in our Saviour's completed work come from? That's the question we are dealing with. And it is an important question, for the answer identifies us as a church. There are some individuals that speak in a way that suggests faith is a type of work. For instance, they will say, that they have chosen to believe or to accept the teachings of Christ.

However, Scripture says that the Holy Spirit produces faith in our hearts as the word is proclaimed. We cannot create faith on our own! We cannot say, "there is faith on the shelf, I will now decide to take it and make it my own." That doesn't work. It doesn't work for Scripture teaches, that we were "dead in our trespasses and sins" (Eph 2:1). Spiritually dead people would never choose faith in Jesus Christ, even if it was as easy as taking it off the shelf. They wouldn't do so for they are unable! Spiritually dead people don't become spiritually alive without a miracle of God. Eph 2:4, goes on to say that it is only when God's mercy quickens us to life in Christ, by his Holy Spirit, that we come to be spiritually alive!

And then verse 8-9; remind us that our faith is a gift from God, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast." But there are other passages that make this clear as well. In John 6:37, Jesus says, "All the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away." John 6:44 reminds us that no one comes to Jesus, unless the Father in heaven draws him through his word and Spirit. So the faith we have in God is from God! And that is special even if we don't realize it ourselves at this point of time. We can take no credit for it.

Now the question remains, how does this faith begin and what is the means that God uses to bring about faith? Our reading from Romans 10:14ff reminds us that it is primarily through the preaching of the holy gospel which creates faith. Now this simple answer has caused much debate and has even caused some to leave our denomination because they think we place too much emphasis on the preaching of the word and not enough on music and singing and mission work.

In some ways, I find it sad that people try to drive a wedge between these things, for all Christian words put to music can be very useful way of creating faith. Many of us still know biblical songs we learnt in Sunday School. Likewise, with Christian missions. Mat Warren is in the process of becoming a missionary to Niger. He is going to do that by bringing the Word, the gospel. So let's not drive a wedge between these things.

I guess the question we need to ask is, "Can we come to true faith in God apart from the Holy Spirit applying the gospel to our hearts in whatever form that takes?" In theology we speak of knowing God through general and special revelation. General revelation reveals God through creation, the nature around us, through the events in history and as our conscience speaks to us.

Now these these three things might give us an idea that there is a God, and I think is a very useful tool in evangelism. When the Holy Spirit causes people to search for God, general revelation is a very useful place to start. In fact, Romans 1:18ff speaks about the fact that man is without excuse, for God can at least be known in part by general revelation. But what is the good of knowing there is a God who has made everything, without knowing how to be saved unto eternal life. Although general revelation speaks about God, it doesn't speak to us about salvation. It doesn't say anything about our fall into sin and the need to be forgiven of our sins and the Saviour God has provided in His Son.

Thankfully, therefore, God has provided that additional information, in His Word. Now the Holy Spirit may initially cause us to wonder about creation and to ask the basic questions about life. Who made this world? Why am I here? Where am I going? Is their life after death? I would suggest this is all part of the Holy Spirit's regenerating work of our hearts. However, eventually, the Holy Spirit causes us to hear God's word for that is where we can answer all these questions about creation and life and forgiveness and salvation.

He may use a missionary or a close friend. It maybe by hearing the word through a gospel song. It may even be by someone just stumbling into church one day and hearing the gospel. But it is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Word, which the Holy Spirit uses to produce faith. It applies what we hear and read about Jesus in God's word, from Genesis to Revelation, to our hearts so that we come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Without God's quickening Spirit and Word guiding us, we would only follow the gods we fashion after our own hearts. Man has been doing that for

years! Now this teaching was really the basis for the Reformation. Luther and Calvin and the other reformers held that the infallible Word of God needed to be proclaimed and this should be primary. It's more important than having a minister. It's more important than the green book of forms. It's more important than having a great looking pulpit. It's even more important than having a music band.

John Calvin states that Scripture is needed as a guide and teacher for anyone who would come to know God the Creator. "Scripture" says Calvin, "clearly shows us the true God" (Book 1 Ch 6 p71). Without the 100% of Scripture to guide us, we would fall into error. That's why we hold Scripture up high for we need something that is 100% truth. That is why we hold to the infallible Word of God! The Bible does not just contain the word of God, but it IS the word of God!

So apart from the Word of God, which is all truth, we cannot know God correctly and therefore cannot have true saving faith in God. Scripture communicates to us what the general revelation cannot. And so what a wonderful blessing to have the Word! Don't take it lightly! God in his mercy foresaw that even though his likeness is imprinted upon the most beautiful form of the universe that it would not be sufficient to bring sinful man to salvation. And so He caused His Word to be recorded through the gracious work of the Holy Spirit. And that Word needs to be preached, and put to song and music for it is through this that the Holy Spirit creates faith in the hearts of man.

Now if you are inclined to say that we limit the power of the Holy Spirit by claiming that we cannot know God apart from the Word, then I say to you that, a) Scripture has its authority from God, not from me or the church or anyone else, and b) That the witness of the Holy Spirit must confirm Scripture. That is the only way the authority of the Word of God can be established as certain.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. Sometimes people come and say that the 'spirit' has laid it on their hearts to do this or that or to say this or that. But how do we know that it is not some other spirit, perhaps even an evil spirit? How do we know with certainty that it isn't just their personal bias? We don't unless we test it with the Word! 1 John 4:1, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world!"

Congregation it is amazing what is done and said in the name of the Holy Spirit today! Some of these people mean well, but that can be sincerely wrong. Others are just plain liars who use the word to line their own pockets. And be that as it may, we must approach them in a winsome way and show them how to use God's word correctly. Congregation, we realise that on this side of the grave all our thoughts and ideas are tainted with sin. And if it is tainted with sin, then what we say may be fallible! That is why we hold the Word of God as our sure guide!

When the Word of God is preached faithfully, then the Holy Spirit does his work. The first European convert to Christ was a business woman named Lydia. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message (Acts 16:14). No man or woman has come to faith by another route. It is always the Holy Spirit creating faith by means of the Word. Now having said that, this does not mean that every one comes to faith in Christ by the same route. God, who created every tree different from the next should not be expected to limit Himself to Reformed or Presbyterian or Baptist or Anglican patterns in generating and rearing his children.

Furthermore, seldom does the Holy Spirit strike like lightning and bypass created relationships. God taught many of us through the teaching of our parents, even before we could properly read and write. Paul reminds himself of the faith of Timothy's mother and grandmother. Let's not be embarrassed to say when asked why we believe in God, Christ and the Bible that we were brought up that way. It is a privilege to be brought up that way. Yes, some people have miraculous conversions, but this is not the norm. God's gift of faith and his goodness reach most Christians through simple Weet-Bix and toast and prayers. We learn the Christian religion, like everything else, by imitation. By watching our parents and other leaders as they respond to the Word of God!

Now how do we know our faith is genuine? When there is a genuine desire to be obedient to his revealed will and to be part of a believing community. People who say they have faith and who wish to be a Christian all on their own without any church affiliation have missed this aspect of faith. On the other hand, faith, like love, is also intensely personal. By his Word and Spirit, God gives us personal trust in Christ. We can also know our faith is genuine, when we dare to be biblically critical of it. In other words, does what I hear from the minister or a close friend align with God's word? We are to hold what we hear in to the light of God's Don't be embarrassed to be like the Bereans who examined the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul was saying was true [Acts 17].

Don't be gullible and just accept some minister of friend's word! Don't just sing along with any song, test it to see if the words align with the truth of Scripture. It's important, for some leaders who claim to be spiritual, have no regard for the word. They get on stage and tell their audiences and listeners to empty their minds and believe what they say to you as absolute truth. And many people are led astray! I say again, test the words of any preacher with the ultimate test of truth, God's own Word. Test the Words of the Anglican, the charismatic, the Presbyterian and the Reformed minister! Test the word of the guest speaker, whoever he or she may be! Don't be gullible!

In closing, I just wish to speak briefly on the strengthening of our faith. Ordinarily we find and strengthen faith by exposing ourselves to the tools God uses, namely, the Word of God and the sacraments and even prayer. If we want to get good at golf, we not only need to buy the clubs, we have to be taught and to practice. The best place for me to do that is to go where I can get good teaching! When we have been given the gift of faith, we must come to God's workshop. The church of Jesus Christ is where God's children are born and nourished. Yes, God can nourish his work of salvation elsewhere and at any time but it would be careless of us not to go where He normally does his work, namely his church.

God's workshop also includes Bible studies, men's breakfasts, music and singing. It includes Christian schools, in fact wherever his children are gathered together and taught the gospel is his workshop. God also strengthens our faith when we prayerfully meditate over His word at a personal level. Do family and personal devotions. God strengthens our faith, both corporately and as individually by his word.

Now some people say that the more we celebrate the sacraments, the more chance that faith will be created. But the sacraments do not produce faith, they confirm it and strengthen it. Therefore, the sacraments are only for believers. The Word of God is both for believers and unbelievers, but the sacraments are for believers only. That makes us distinct as a Church. That's why in our Churches it is the Word of God that is central with the two sacraments on either side or below.

Congregation, let us pray for each other that we may all keep the infallible Word of God above all else. For God uses the Holy Gospel to create faith in his people. And without faith in Jesus Christ, people are lost! How beautiful indeed, are the feet of those who bring the good news! Amen.