

A Rabbi asks his students 'How can we determine the hour of dawn, when the night ends and the day begins?' One student suggests 'When, from a distance, you can distinguish between a dog and a sheep.' 'No,' the Rabbi answers. 'Is it when you can distinguish between a fig tree and a grapevine?' asks a second student. 'No,' the Rabbi says. 'Please tell us the answer, then,' say the students. 'It is,' says the wise teacher, 'when you have enough light to look human beings in the face and recognise them as your brothers and sisters. Until then the darkness is still with us.'

Paul had this to say to the Church at Colossae: '..we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that springs from the hope that is stored up for you and that you have already heard about in the word of truth.' It speaks of 'living in the light' and recognising who our brothers and sisters are.

There was a point I got fed up with having to read about faith, hope and love in I Corinthians 13 time and time again at weddings, funerals and other occasions. But now I can't get enough of it. It is so central to our Christian faith. And if only we could grasp faith, hope and love, we would be transformed as people and transformed as a Church. And if we don't get it, Paul repeats their importance here in his letter to the Church at Colossae.

Faith. This letter written by the apostle Paul, who as Saul had this arresting experience with the living Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus. He thought he knew all about God and had the measure of him. But in meeting with Jesus he realised that he had got it very wrong. He thought he knew freedom, but was in actual fact enslaved by his own prejudices and philosophy. He had not learned as the Psalmist put it to ask 'Show me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths.' Saul's path was to go to Damascus to persecute the Christians, because he believed passionately that he was right and they were wrong and this sect, this lie had to be stamped out. But it was not the way or path of the Lord.

It takes great strength of character and humility to admit that you are on the wrong track, heading on the wrong direction. Paul's life challenges us as does the example of the church at Colossae. Let me remind you of what Paul says to the Church at Colossae '..we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way...'

I had the privilege of being at General Assembly this past week. I don't know what others thought, but I thought it was brilliant and its not very often I say that about Church Councils. I hope it filters down to Synods and to Church Meeting. There was a lot which encouraged me. But let me say two or three things in this context.

In the Moderator's report, presented by Peter Brain offered an insight into what it means to be a reformed church. Many of us will be familiar with the Latin phrase 'semper Reformanda', usually translated as always reforming. Peter suggested that a valid interpretation of the phrase is 'always open to God's creative Spirit.' Think what might happen if we were open to God's creative Spirit. I have been struggling this week about who we should appoint as a Youth Worker at St Andrew's. We are down to one candidate and my head says he is not the one, but my heart (and is that the Spirit) is saying he's the one – watch this space as we test his calling next weekend.

In the latest Catch the Vision report, you will read, 'Waiting on God in worship is the most important activity of human life.' That is hard to grasp in a church, where doing is so much more important than being, where head knowledge counts for everything and hunches (or should that be promptings of the Spirit) are treated with suspicion.

This life of faith is dangerous and scary stuff. It is a revolution in how we think and the way we act. But wasn't that what Jesus came to do, to cause a revolution and wasn't that what Paul experienced and isn't that what the Church needs if we are truly to be God's people. Once you get into it, it is exciting. And God offers us a promise: Psalm 25 v. 10 'all the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant.'

Faith. Love. Paul speaks of his love for the Church in Colossae and refers to their love for their brothers and sisters in Christ. I don't know about you, but I find loving really easy. I find it really easy to love the people who are like me and can see things my way. But if I am honest, it is harder if not impossible to like those who are different or with whom I disagree. But Paul's example is harder still, he loves people that he has not even met! But there again is it really that hard. Again General Assembly challenged me. I met people I was at college with who I disagreed with at the time and in one or two cases would disagree with more vehemently today. I also met people who I had never met before and hey, they were alright. Going about the Manchester Campus was strange, people were saying 'Good morning' or 'Hello and they had never met each other.

Now this Assembly was the one where the moratorium on human sexuality was lifted – O joy!! But do you know this, an almost unanimous resolution was passed. We agreed to a commitment to explore together, to listen and respect one another. At a point when I expected blood to be spilt and people to be at each others throats there was a peace and a calm. Who knows where God is leading us, but it was an amazing start.

Faith and love. Hope. At another debate in General Assembly we were talking about environmental issues. The debate was getting very depressing, our Carbon footprints are more like those of dinosaurs, rather than size 9's. It looked as though the only thing we could do was beat ourselves up, crawl away and die quietly in a corner somewhere.

That was when one of our theologians got up and spoke. A theologian yes, but we could understand him. He encourage us to bring to the debate on the environment , our faith. He suggested that two pillars of our faith should inform the debate. The first was repentance. It is right to acknowledge our failings and to be turned around to face a new direction. Repentance is never too late, as demonstrated by the thief on the cross, crucified next to Jesus. It is never too late to have a change of heart and mind, although we can sometimes be a bit slow about it. I get depressed by too much packaging, we seem to have been talking about that for years.

The other nugget in faith is 'hope.' The Psalmist declares 'To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul; in you I trust, O my God. Do not let me be put shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me..' The speaker at Assembly made it clear that while some maverick scientists declare the ecological disaster we face a fantasy, the reality is that things are not good. But as Christians, our faith is not in ourselves, nor in science, but in the living God who created the world and sent his one and only Son Jesus Christ to redeem it. Yes, hope is a future home but for Paul and the Church at Colossae and that new born Jesus movement, the Gospel is a message of Good News and of hope for now. Like the Psalmist we should not despair.

Faith, love and hope. It is a recipe that God gives Christians, that he offers to the Church so that we might be renewed, that we might be redeemed. It is the Gospel, the good news for our world, where there is little faith, a lack of love and a deep sense of hopelessness. May we be encouraged by the Gospel, may we live the Gospel, may we share the Gospel.