

Whom do you trust?

Psalm 62.6-14 / Jonah 3.1-5,10 / Mk.1.14-20

Whom do you trust? No – I mean it – think about the people you really trust. I suspect there aren't very many of them. Last year's survey by market researchers indicated that 85% of people trust doctors, 78% trust teachers, 74% judges, 56% police, 51% lawyers, 39% bankers and 9% politicians. Only 54% trust clergy, That was the survey – but remember only 45% of people said they trusted market researchers!

Those are quite alarming figures. If less than 1 out of ten people think they can trust the people who make our laws and govern the country, where does that leave us? I don't think that has anything to do with political parties – it is politicians as a breed. If less than four out of ten people really trust the people to whom they entrust their money, are most of us not being stupid?

And what is it that makes people trustworthy? If you take dictionary definitions, then you come up with things like someone being reliable, honest, able to keep confidences, to have personal integrity and being loyal. To be thought trustworthy is extraordinarily complementary. Indeed George MacDonald, the great writer of children's books, said that 'to be trusted is a greater compliment than to be loved.'

The Psalmists were prone to tell people who can't be trusted. In today's Psalm 'Put no trust in extortion. In another one we read 'Some put their trust in chariots, and some in horses'. The Lay Clerks at Manchester Cathedral when I was a teenager always referred to that as the 'Grand National Psalm'. In Psalm 118 we read verses which sum up the Psalmists' general mistrust. In two consecutive verses it says 'It is better to trust in the Lord than to put any confidence in man. It is better to trust in the Lord than to put any confidence in princes.' And we hear both the positive and negatives in today's Psalm also – 'Put your trust in him (i.e. in God) O people...Those of high degree are but a fleeting breath, even those of low estate cannot be trusted. On the scales they are lighter than breath, all of them together.'

So today's cynicism about the ruling elite, and about many professionals is there in the Bible – in what we hear in today's Psalm the more eminent someone is, the less trustworthy they are likely to be. Is that cynicism or is it a statement forged out of experience? And does it still apply today? Those are questions to be wrestled with. Because the fact is that we can't live life without trusting people. I have to trust that the people who wired this church for electricity did so in a way which will keep us safe. I have to trust that the scholars who translated the Bible readings we hear knew what they were doing, and therefore that what we hear is an accurate representation of what the original writers intended. I have to trust that the mechanics who service my car have done so in a way that will keep me safe on the road. There are no final guarantees on any of those, or on anything else. But if I don't live as if there were, I couldn't function. We need 'provisional trust' if nothing else.

But in contrast to all that provisionality, and to the basically pessimistic view that you can't trust anyone, the Bible keeps echoing with words about trust in God. And that tends to be about absolute trust, not the

half-hearted kind exemplified by Oliver Cromwell's famous saying 'Trust in God but keep your powder dry.' We have had two examples of it in our readings today. Jonah is told in that story (remember Jonah is a sermon, not a history book) to go and tell the people of Nineveh that in forty days they will be overthrown. Now to do that takes a lot of trust. It is hard enough simply to go anywhere and say 'God says' whatever it may be. But it takes even more to say something that people won't want to hear. But in the story, the people listen and repent, rather than telling Jonah where he can go, or running him out of town. And the end result of his trustworthiness is that God doesn't zap the people of Nineveh after all. It reflects an understanding of how God acts which only a minority would share today! The story of Jesus puts a final stop to the idea of a God who zaps those who get up his nose. But this is a story of trust being put by God in this unlikely person (remember Jonah had initially run away when God asked him to go to Nineveh, and got swallowed by a great fish. – but three days in the intestinal juices of a great fish persuade him to think again) and then trust being put in God by Jonah himself. One act of trust leads to another. Mother Teresa was a bit perturbed by that. She once said that she knew God wouldn't give her anything to do she couldn't handle. But she added 'I just wish he didn't trust me so much.'

Then in the Gospel, we heard about the call of Simon, Andrew, James and John. Just think about what it says – here are four brawny fishermen who are accosted by an unknown wandering preacher, asked to leave their work and their family and go with him. They don't say that they will think about it. They don't ask for time to sort out their commitments. They don't look in their smartphones to see what else they have got on. They just up sticks and go with him. Somehow or other Jesus engendered in them a trust which was quite extraordinary. And we could argue perfectly reasonably that if they hadn't had that trust, we wouldn't be here this morning.

I started by asking who was trustworthy in your book. I now have to ask whether you trust God, or to reflect on the *extent* to which you trust God. If we were to draw a line which at one end has the attitude of Jonah, and of Simon and Andrew, James and John, and at the other end had the attitude of Cromwell with his 'Trust God and keep your powder dry' – where on that line would you place yourself? Don't feel guilty if you are nearer to Cromwell than to the others – but do take it as a challenge to think about it more. It is a two-way process – realising how much God trusts us, and responding with trusting him. But that may be a chicken and egg matter. You probably know the famous saying of the great Baptist missionary to India, William Carey. It is usually quoted as 'Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God' – but interestingly the Carey Society has traced all sorts of variant versions, with no certainty about which was the original. It takes on a different aspect if you hear it as 'Attempt great things for God: expect great things from God.' There are so many aspects of Christian living which have that two-way ambiguity. St John's saying 'We loved because he first loved us' is the best example. But it applies to so many things. Some of the people who have been the most forgiving and unjudgemental Christians have been those who know themselves to have been forgiven much themselves. Some of the most generous Christians are those who are aware of how much God has given them.

But is God trustworthy? That may seem almost blasphemous to ask, but it is the problem which many people who find belief difficult are wrestling with. They may feel they have been personally let down by God – and so find it difficult to trust. They may feel that there are so many questions which challenge the idea that God can be relied on that they see trust as a blind and unreasonable thing. But remember there is a counter-balancing challenge in the words of the hymn ‘Blind unbelief is sure to err’. Blind belief and blind unbelief is not what it is about. Those of us who find we can trust God do so because as we look back through history, and through our own experience, we have found that God has all those characteristics which the dictionary says are about trustworthiness – he is reliable, he is loyal, there is a total integrity about him. We can say with a hymn that will be sung many times today ‘O God our help in ages past’. The evidence of human searching, of human knowledge in the end of the day doesn’t negate any of those things. I feel I can say with perfect honesty that I believe God has never let me down. That doesn’t mean there haven’t been problems and soul-searchings and black times. But in the end of the day, I can trust. But trust is what it says – something which goes beyond rationality. One of my favourite theological quotations is from the Danish c19th theologian Soren Kierkegaard. He said faith (which is near enough the same word as trust) is ‘like floating on 40,000 fathoms of water.’ You have to trust that it will hold you up. If you don’t trust that to be the case, it will drown you. In Mark 9 we read the story of the healing of a boy who had fits. His father says to Jesus ‘Lord I believe, help my unbelief.’ We can make that our prayer as we think about trust, and say to God ‘Lord, I trust, help my lack of trust.’ Trustworthiness feeds itself. The more we trust God, the more we have the evidence that trust in God makes sense. The Psalmist wrote ‘O taste and see how gracious the Lord is. Blest is the man who trusts in him’. Maybe we can paraphrase that by saying ‘O trust and see how trustworthy the Lord is – blest is the man who trusts in him’. That is why we read the stories of Jesus week after week. They tell us over and over again that here is a man who can be trusted – just as those fishermen we hear about in the gospel found to a remarkable degree.