

Passing On the Faith: An Ancient-Modern Challenge

Text: Deuteronomy 11:18-21,26-28

- Come back with me this morning some 3500 years to a precarious point in the history of people of Israel.
- Massed together on the eastern bank of the Jordan River, God's chosen people were about to enter the Promised Land. After years of wilderness wandering this was a moment filled with expectation, with new hopes, with wonderful new possibilities.
- But there were also great risks – in particular, spiritual risks. Now they were to cross the river and settle down in the midst of other peoples, other nations. There they would be confronted with new customs, new religions, new temptations – all with the potential to draw them away from Yahweh.
- This was a point of crisis – of both opportunity and of danger.
- Would their relationship with God be able to survive in this new land? Would faith in Yahweh be passed on from generation to generation in this new land, or would it end with the likes of Joshua and Caleb?

- Today, I believe it is fair to say that the Christian church in our country is facing a crisis of similar proportions.
- It is not that the modern people of God have physically moved from one place to another. We have remained largely where we are – it is the world that has moved around us.
- In many ways, the Australia of today is largely unrecognizable from that of seventy years ago or even thirty years ago.
- And many, many of the changes that have taken place have threatened the standing, the authority, the capacity of the Christian church to pass on the faith in our culture.
- The messages that children and young people receive from society, from the media, from popular culture are often anti-Christian – even spiritually toxic - in effect.
- The community at large can no longer be relied on to support us in teaching faith and values. Christian living is increasingly counter-cultural.

- How then are we to pass on faith to the next generation in this environment?
 - The question facing God's people some 3500 years ago.
 - The question facing us also today in 2005 AD.

- The Old Testament text we heard read earlier – from Deuteronomy 11 – records some ancient and divine wisdom given by God to the people of Israel through his prophet Moses.
- This wisdom was given to direct and guide them in their practice of faith in their new environment.
- And this same wisdom can, I believe, help us today - as parents, as families, as godparents, grandparents, as a whole community of faith – as we strive to pass on faith to the next generation God has placed in our care.

- Based on this text, I want to share with you this morning what have come to be known as the “Four Keys for Passing on the Faith in Home and Congregation”. These Four Keys come out of the work of the Youth and Family Institute, a Lutheran organisation based in Minnesota, USA.
- The research of the Institute has shown that the more the Four Keys are deeply woven into the lives of homes and congregations, the more likely children and young people are to grow in faith and remain active in church life.
- The Four Keys apply very directly into family life – but they are also relevant to those who live by themselves or who live without youth or children.
- Passing on the faith is a calling of our whole faith community – each of us is part of it. It is not just up to individual families.
- In this community we are all faith brothers and sisters, faith fathers and mothers, faith uncles and aunts. Each of us share the responsibility to nurture the next generation in faith – and so, the words of Moses apply not only to parents-with-children families but to each of us.

The Four Keys

- Let's look now at the Four Keys in turn:

Key #1: Devotional Practices

- The first instruction that God gave to the Israelites was to “*put these words of mine into your heart and soul*”.
- God's Word is not given to us as an information resource or a reference book, but so that we may encounter living God through his Word – so that his words might come into our hearts and our souls.
- How do the words of God come become part of us? They become part of us as we develop regular practices that order our days, and that allow God to speak to us and shape us.
 - practices of reading God's word.
 - practices of reflecting on or studying God's word with others, including in our homes.
 - practices of prayer.
 - practices of singing the faith.
- The more we allow God's word to shape our lives through such practices, the more he is able to use us as significant people – whether as parents, grandparents or faith mentors - in the lives of others.
- And the more we are able to gather around God's word in our homes, the more that word can shape and grow our families as living units of faith.

Key #2: Caring Conversation

- A second instruction of God to the Israelites was to teach his words to their children by “*by talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise*”.
- The call here is to full-time faith-talk – or communication with others that is grounded in faith and reflects Godly values.

- Caring conversation does not mean that we need to use God's name in every sentence. Our caring conversations can range from supportive listening to simple praising, from challenging admonitions to comfort or encouragement.
- At its heart, caring conversation is about conveying God's care through what we choose to say and do. Its about relating our faith to daily life, and relating faith in daily life.
- It's about using language – both verbal and non-verbal – to speak Christ into the hearts and lives of those around us.

Key #3: Rituals and Traditions

- A third way by which God directed his Old Testament people to pass on faith was through rituals and traditions.
- Rituals are behaviours or actions that are repeated again and again. Traditions are customs that we adopt to give our lives meaning and purpose.
- The Israelites were to “*tie*” God's words as symbols on their hands, and “*bind*” them to their foreheads. They were to “*write*” them on their doorposts and their gates.
- These were rituals – symbolic actions that would help the Israelites remember God in daily life.
- The power of faith rituals and traditions is that they help us arrange or order our lives, and remind us of what is most important.
- The way people greet each other, table graces, bedtime blessings, birthday or baptismal anniversary celebrations, Lent and Advent practices – these are all examples of home rituals and traditions that help us connect faith with daily life.

Key #4: Service

- The fourth key is that of service: giving time, resources and energy to help others.
- While service does not appear explicitly in our text, it is very much part of the spirit of Deuteronomy.
- E.g. Deuteronomy 15:11 – “*Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land*”.
- Service is an extremely powerful way of sharing our faith and values with those around us: it shows how faith makes a difference in our lives.
- And as others share with us, they not only learn what we value – they themselves get a sense of how God is using them and is present with them.
- Together, these “Four Keys” – Devotional Practices, Caring Conversation, Rituals and Traditions, and Service – give us a shape for the baptismal life. For daily living as baptised children of God.
- As we practice the “Four Keys” with those around us – in our homes, in our workplaces, in our social settings, in our communities – we not only grow in our own faith, but we enter into God's means of passing on the faith to others.
- A danger of talking about the “Four Keys” is that they become just another set of demands on the Christian life ... just another “have to do” sort of thing.

- They become a burden, or perhaps even a source of guilt.
- But to see them as demands, is to lose the very sense of what passing on faith is all about.
- The Israelites were not called to pass on their faith in order for God to be their God, but because he already was their God.
- Look at verses 26-27: *"See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing of you obey the commandments of the Lord **your** God that I am commanding you today"*.
- God was giving his directions for passing on faith to a people who already knew and had already experienced his love for them.
- Passing on the faith was not a demand God placed on them, but a call that flowed out of their relationship with him,

The Way of the Lord Our God – a God who is Known

- Brothers and sisters in Christ – if the OT people of Israel knew of God's love and care on the basis of their escape from Egypt, how much more do we know and his love and care on account of the cross of Christ!
- Romans 3:23-24: "All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. But God treats us much better than we deserve, and because of Christ Jesus, he freely accepts us and sets us free from our sins:"
- This is the faith we have to pass on: that through Christ, God has set us free from our sins.
- Through Christ, God has brought us into a new relationship with him. Passing on the faith is an expression of that relationship – not a burden but a calling thankfully received and explored.

Having the Blessing, Sharing the Blessing

- What does it mean to pass on the Christian faith?
- First of all it means to have the faith oneself – to have Christ and all his blessings.
- Secondly, it means to freely share those blessings with others around us, including in our own homes.
- Thus understood, the Four Keys are good gifts of God for our journeying together as his baptised children.