

The A, B, C's for A, B, C.

In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him.

For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.

For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Hebrews 12:4-24 ESV)

Angela came into church and sat down. She'd happily tell you she was a Christian. She believed that Jesus died for her and rose again. She didn't have any specific religious experiences in which Jesus actually spoke to her. She'd never seen Jesus. She would say that she just knew he was true and she trusted his Word. So why this week as she waited for the pastor to begin the service, did she have so many questions in her mind, whether or not Jesus was true or was she just deluding herself? If she believed, why did she question?

Bruce came into church and sat down. He believed that Jesus died for him and sought to live his life as a disciple. This meant thinking about what the relationship with Jesus meant for the other relationships he had – family, neighbours, friends, colleagues, strangers, even those he really didn't like. So he was forever thinking about his behaviour which meant that on many occasions he didn't behave as his instinct or guts told him but more reflectively. So why did he panic, think self preservation, and run away when he made an accidental but big mistake at work? Where was all his reflection and behaviour now when in an instant he could demonstrate that his guts still could take control?

Chan came into church and sat down. She was irritable, out of sorts. This week she figured out why. For months she'd been critical of the pastor and his boring sermons and boring worship. She wanted things more lively, more energy, more contemporary. She wanted to feel alive in the faith. Many of her friends talked about Jesus in a personal way – he told them this, he told them that, life was exciting – and for her – zilch, zip, zero. It occurred to her this week that her pastor and his leading of worship was just the easy target to attack – the one she could see. The one she was cross with was God – now that was somewhat scary: to actually think about God, say you believed in him, and then tell him you were cross with him – but she so wanted to experience him and he was silent. C'mon God, what's the harm in giving me a sign, an experience, an assurance that you're there?

Angela, Bruce, and Chan we might call the A B C's of Christian experience. We could also list D E F as well about Christian experience and if that was the topic for today's sermon, we might think for starters, 'Well, you could have chosen better examples'. But today's sermon isn't about Christian experience but, as always, about faith – we live by faith and not by sight Paul reminded the Corinthians (2 Cor 5:7) – that something that is actually beyond the senses, that is always a gift first and then a task, that is more than knowledge, that exists in all sorts of situations, hormones, circumstances, and so often seems compromised in some way by sin, questions, longing, anxiety, peer group pressure and much much more.

I expect we're more used to such things – have more Christian biographies to read – than in the first century of the early church. But these issues – what is the Christian faith and what does it mean for my life today? – are always the cutting edge of Christian experience. So when we read the book of Hebrews – and we're not sure who wrote it – making a good guess for it being written in the 60's AD (before the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem) – we find ourselves reading how Jewish Christians saw their faith in terms of their past – God and his angels, the priests, high priest, worship, sacrifices, tabernacle and temple, the faith of the followers of God – and we hear as it were, the writer saying 'Don't let your version of what you think your relationship with God should be – what your experiences should be – determine your faith, determine your behaviour'.

The second reading picks up what being a Christian is all about – living by faith and trust with God with no visible means of support. Not letting sin's existence rob you of your faith. Seeing God not as vending machine – he's there if good things happen to me – but as our Heavenly Father – and our struggles with the faith are normal. The writer to the Hebrews describes experience as discipline. Such experiences – even if martyrdom comes – are evidence of God's presence in a sinful world – evidence of his love that is taking back a world in the thralls of sin, death and the power of the devil.

Human experience is important for us – a good confirmation when we know the situation around us – but a lousy interpreter of situations. Think of any experience of pain or pleasure and if you don't know their context – why they're happening – why you're feeling as you do – you really don't know which is good for you and why.

The writer to the Hebrews is picking up on the Christian experience of endurance or struggle or wondering why is this happening if I'm following the true God of the universe and his answer is twofold: 1. You are God's children living in enemy territory on your journey home and he will not abandon you but you should recognise the landscape you're in; and 2. It's actually always been this way for the Old Testament people actually became blinded by the experiences of Mount Sinai and sacrifices and the temple either by terror or by complacency and they forgot that they, too, lived by faith and not by sight.

What does this mean? It means that we need words to give us our identity and relationships and it is belief in these words that shape our lives. While our families are created by DNA, they are even more created by words – yes, you're my child; yes, I'm your parent. Words can even override DNA. Marriages are created by words – I promise to be faithful to you. The minister doesn't marry the couple but in fact says that they said the correct words and then he uses words from God to bless the couple. Our relationships are shaped by words – just say something nice or nasty and see what happens. The words are the foundation of the experiences.

For Christians the words are bloody – literally – they're about sacrifice – Jesus and his cross – and how God has established a new covenant, a new relationship with sinners and directs people again and again to the source of the words, to the guarantee of the words – and it is not our experiences – but a wooden cross. If this message is true, then everything is changed and the world is turned upside down – grace, mercy, love go hand in hand with repentance, struggle, and faith – which are usually either experience-less or not the best ones. Surely this can't be? We want God and his good things – joy and power – and all we seem to get again and again is a message about the cross. Yet this is the foundation we need – we are a forgetful people – hankering after the next experience 'fix' – but finding again and again, that this cross, this Jesus, shapes us so that we can be honest, recognise who we are, own our actions (good or otherwise), and follow Jesus through his word and sacraments. Thus we can **admit** our sins and fears and hopes and dreams; we can **believe** this Jesus because God has given us a relationship with him; and we can **confirm** this faith by following Jesus each day, knowing that we live by faith and not by sight and the experiences come what may. Such are the ABC's of the Christian faith for us all.

And no matter what Angela, Bruce, and Chan experienced in church, Jesus came and served them.