

Poets and Philosophers



Hebrews 11:1 "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval (from God, our Father)."

Faith, I believe, too often gets translated for us into some set of accepted articles of belief, a creed, a theological statement, a correct Biblical understanding. And we Christians, it seems to me, prefer to argue about these so-called core doctrines and the correct scriptural reading on this issue or that, like abortion, or homosexuality, or the historical Jesus, rather than to simply love and care for one another. Jesus once said that people will know that we are his disciples by our love

(Jn. 13:35), not by our beliefs. But sadly, our religion has become more an activity of the mind than of the heart. And this is, I fear, a terrible corruption of the true meaning of faith, as exemplified in today's reading from the Epistle to the Hebrews.

The Latin word "credo," for instance, from which we derive the English word "creed" also derives from the same root of the English word for 'cardiac,' and more properly refers not to the progression of our thoughts and ideas, but to the movements of our hearts and emotions. The word "faith" is really more of a verb than a noun, and should not be translated in my opinion as we so often do into a static term like "belief," as in 'belief in God.' Faith implies not so much a set of articles of belief or some accepted creed so much as an attitude, involving more not what we think, but what we feel. Faith, I think, should be more properly translated into an active verb, like "trust," as in the phrase 'trust in God.' Faith is, as the author of Hebrews reminds us, more about assurance and conviction, than right thinking. Faith is more about our actions than our thoughts, as exemplified by the author of Hebrews who tells us what Abraham, not what he thought. Believing in God is more an activity of the heart than of the mind. And as a result, true faith is therefore sometimes more accessible to the gentle and lowly in heart than to the clever and intelligent. Our faith in God is less a matter

of understanding, and more simply a matter of trust: confidence in God, a deep-seated and simple reliance upon God's love and care. And perhaps for this reason, faith often appears to have been hidden from the wise and the knowing; and seen more by the gentle and humble of heart. Faith is often more clearly found in the peasant farmer than in the university scholar.

Jesus, in the end, was not a theologian. He was a storyteller. He expounded upon the meaning of faith, not with the use of dogma or doctrine, not with intellectual concepts and abstractions, not even with Jewish Law. He did not teach like the scribes and Pharisees did, we are told, but he still taught with authority. Jesus was a poet, not a philosopher. He expounded upon the most important religious concerns for humanity by telling parables. He used stories, not ideas, to teach us about our faith and the ways of God our Father.

Jesus was, in fact, a rather simple man. His life was not very sophisticated. He lived in minor fishing villages around the Sea of Galilee. Jesus' stories and parables were rarely urbane or complicated. Jesus expounded upon fundamental questions of life and faith with simple and everyday illustrations and examples, with references to yokes for oxen, leaven in the bread, salt that has lost its flavor, seeds for sowing, lilies in the field, purses that do not grow old, and servants waiting for their master's return.

Yet this is sometimes not good news for us. In fact, we are sometimes disappointed that Jesus was not more sophisticated and refined than he was. We are sometimes even embarrassed by Jesus' very ordinariness and simplicity. For we usually seek instead to be polished and cultured even in our religious yearnings. It seems to me that we are sometimes more interested in the lofty ideas of religion, and a proper and correct understanding of dogma and doctrine, than in having a simple and abiding faith. Our heroes of Christianity are most often profound religious thinkers, great preachers and theologians like St. Paul, or St. Augustine of Hippo, or Thomas Aquinas, because we do not want to appear pedestrian in our faith. Our desire to boldly comprehend and declare our faith in self-assured creeds and well-chiseled formulas is sometimes greater than our desire to be in a personal and loving relationship with God. We are, I am afraid, often more interested in orthodoxy, than in holiness.

Interestingly, it is often hard to prove and argue many of our doctrines of faith with an appeal to Jesus' own words or actions; it is to other places in Scripture that we must turn to, to St. Paul or the Books of Law in the Torah. Thus, what really unites us then as Christians, I think, is not a common acceptance of some creed or doctrine, for in fact Christians rarely agree upon such things, and often forcefully disagree, as evidenced by the recent Conference of Anglican Bishops at

Lambeth in England. What unites us as Christians, I think, are our stories, the common inheritance we have received together, the history we share, the narrative tales of our forebears that we have learned and passed down from generation to generation, those stories of "the men of old that received divine approval," in the words of the letter to the Hebrews. But also, we are united when we share our own personal stories, our own individual faith struggles and journeys, and how we have found God present in our lives and in the life of this community. The sharing of all those anecdotes is what builds trust and intimacy with God and with one another. That, I believe, is the tie that binds us together, our common humanity.

In the last analysis, Jesus' message contrasted sharply with both the Pharisees of his day and the theologians of ours. We do not have to understand and correctly articulate the doctrine of Salvation, for instance, in order to be saved. We do not have to figure out how we got lost in the first place, whose fault it was, or exactly what we did that was wrong. We do not have to understand how it is that we are now found, what occasions our salvation, what are the consequences of our sin or the price that was paid for them. Those are questions for Pharisees and theologians, not us. For Scripture confirms that God will not despise a broken and contrite heart, or a troubled spirit. God loves us and forgives us, as we are. These are

simple human feelings and emotions to be experienced and to be expressed, not complex ideas and understandings.

We can all comprehend faith at this level. It is poetry to our ears. And it is poetry that we need, not philosophy. It is stories and parables that call to our hearts, that will aid us in our repentance and in our joy, not theological doctrines and dilemmas which speak more to our minds. The Church needs more poets and fewer thinkers, I believe. For we are not saved by the progression of our thoughts, but by the movements of our hearts. And in the end, we cannot really save ourselves at all. It is God who saves us, for our salvation is not the result of a human act or a moment of understanding, but is God's free gift to us, in which God undertakes to do for us that which we cannot do or even understand for ourselves. As Jesus said to his disciples in this morning's Gospel, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. . . For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." So, in the words of the prophet Isaiah this morning, "learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, (and) plead for the widow." AMEN