

Faith is always the point at which the infinite touches the finite. Hope is the promised more beyond - the gift in the hands of the Other. And love that self giving fullness which is the source and consummation of both. And now these three abide: faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is love."

'You've got to have faith.'... I don't know if there are many issues on which Martin Luther and George Michael find themselves singing from the same song sheet, but on *this* issue it seems they are in perfect harmony.

In fact, on this subject, if *not* on many others, people of just about every religious inclination seem to agree. You have got to have faith. So much so that Faith has become society's catch-all term of choice to replace the word 'religion' - with its overtones of binding obligation or painstaking repetition - we are faith communities, people of faith...

And certainly, within the Christian tradition alone, you could open the New Testament to just about any page you like and find this theme of faith-as-paramount writ large. Apart from the single chapter of John's last two letters, every NT book mentions faith, Paul in our Epistle advocates taking on the *shield* of faith above *all*, and in the Gospels - most of Jesus encounters seem to involve him commending or criticising the faith of those he meets - either directly 'Go your faith has saved you'... 'Ye of little faith' and so on, or implicitly: "except ye see signs and wonders ye will not believe".

But if a casual stroll through the pages of the New Testament leaves you with little room for doubt about the importance of faith, then Nietzsche's observation that "A casual stroll through the lunatic asylum shows faith does not prove anything." might serve as a reminder, like a number of Nietzsche's observations, that it is easy to misunderstand entirely what faith means...

Nietzsche is presenting faith as a wilful avoidance of the pursuit of truth - faith as set against objective reality, in the way lunacy might be set against sanity - faith as offering a hope the facts refuse, an eyes screwed shut sort of believing against all the evidence... But, whilst it is clear from our readings today there is this aspect of faith which transcends the obvious or immediate, even the visible, what the well-known definition from Hebrews makes clear is that faith is not some belief that *generates* hope - faith is the manifestation of hope. The substance of it. Faith, in fact, is not a belief at all - not an idea or a feeling - but a solid presence - and thus an act, or a series of acts, of precisely the kind that might see someone sectioned as mentally ill.

It's significant that the phrase once used most commonly in English for what is now called detention under the mental health act was until recently - to have someone 'committed' to an asylum. Significant because committed is a word that carries echoes of the most serious actions - to commit murder, to commit a body to be buried - and the most serious beliefs and promises - a committed christian, a lifelong commitment - and it is in precisely this combination of action and conviction that faith exists. You don't get committed to a mental health ward for things you think. You get committed for things you do, or might do, on the *basis* of things you think. For acting, for living, as if some other reality exists, than the one a society has (rightly or wrongly) agreed upon.

And so Nietzsche was right to identify in those committed to an asylum something *like* faith, but wrong to assume that their so called lunacy undermined the whole concept of faith - strength of *belief* proves nothing, *FAITH* proves strength of belief - it is "the substance of things hoped for" - the acting as if a thing were trustworthy regardless of whether it is *obviously* trustworthy or not.

So the founding figure of the faith, Abraham, in leaving the known present for the unknown future has faith; so does even the doubting Sarah, conceiving an impossible promise; and so, according to almost all those New Testament pages, we are called to do. To act - to live - as if something is true, in the Biblical sense of the word - as if a very particular something is true - regardless of whether it is obviously true or not, even as we move towards believing, and inhabiting, it more fully.

But if faith is only an acting as if something were true, even when we cannot see it, there is a puzzle for us in our Gospel.

This is a story *about* faith and what is seen and not seen, but it is also a sign to lead us into greater faith, by revealing that although faith does concern itself with acting in the light of an unseen reality, it is more than that, and although faith is a gift - like a mustard seed - faith is a gift that can be nurtured, that can grow. Love's invitation does not just come once, and every acceptance of it is deepening faith...

The Fathers are almost unanimous in seeing this passage in John, as presenting a deliberate contrast to the account of the Centurion, whose faith we seek to emulate and grow into, when we say at every mass: "Lord I am not worthy that shouldst come under my roof" even as we acknowledge the presence of the Word in our midst.

Like the Centurion, the nobleman believes in Jesus, he *has* that most basic faith which is faith enough to *ask*. Will you come and heal my son. But when the Centurion asks Jesus says I will come and heal him. Whereas the nobleman is immediately greeted with a rebuke. That's your trouble - you need to see to believe. To be fair the rebuke is not aimed just at him - the "you", as the older English of the AV captures, is plural, and this is crucially the critique that is a refrain in Jesus' next sign in John's Gospel - the miraculous provision of the bread from heaven - and which is thematic in the Gospels as a whole.

And yet - whether he is addressed as an individual or as representative of a people of little faith, the nobleman's faith is evidently lacking in Jesus eyes. So why?

Even despite Christ's rebuke, he seems to do just what the centurion does - having faith, the passage says, in the word Jesus speaks - acting as if it were true at least - and going on his way... There *is* just this hint that at some level he has failed to grasp something about Jesus, when finally he sees the evidence of that which was previously unseen, and, the text says, in *that* moment believes.

But even if that is somehow the moment he truly believes, isn't that the *point* of a miraculous sign? Doesn't John say he reveals these signs to us so that we might believe. Aren't the Gospels themselves accounts of that which we have seen with our eyes?

Why should someone's faith be lacking just because they come to believe through the signs they are shown?

Why are both Jesus - the supreme evidence of things not seen - and the writer of the Book of Signs so keen to stress that the truly blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed?

Because faith is a thing of degrees. It is not just digital - it is analogue. It is not just a gift. It is a gift that can be cultivated. Lord I believe help my unbelief. And because faith is not a means to a finite end - like a ticket into an event - faith remains eternally active. Mature faith is not *just* acting as if something were true that *might* turn out to be, neither is it acting as if what is seen is not what is real, but learning to see through what we *can* see, that which is infinite and therefore invisible, and learning to partake of what is eternal through the things you can see with your eyes and touch with your hands, the things you can hold and let go - receive and give away - here and now...Faith our outward sense befriending...

So perhaps the key question the Gospel presents is this: is it the sign you seek or the thing the sign points to? Is it just bread you want? Or the one who is the living manna? Is it merely manna you want or the promised land it foreshadows and moves you towards? Is it just the expression of love you desire, the stuff love must be mediated through, or love itself.

What we are led to ask through the criticism implicit in our Gospel, is whether the belief that the Nobleman finally has, is anything more than the belief that Jesus is indeed a reliable source of the things that he needs? Is Christ for him, and so, more significantly, is Christ for us, the source of the blessings we need, or is he the embodiment of the blessed state we are called into, and the way to live in it forever?

It is a subtle distinction. A constant challenge of material existence. But it is across this fine line that faith operates.

Because the faith of Christ - *pistis Christou* - is never just about securing an eternal source of temporal goods it is about the taking of all things temporal, into the life of the eternal.

It is about the turning of the material into the medium for our engagement with the infinite.

This faith is the arena of wrestling with principalities and powers - no longer merely contending with visible circumstances, or the people we are in relationship with, but faithfully engaging in and through them with the unseen struggle between control and freedom, *power and love*;

not just trying to overcome evil doers but seeking to defeat evil itself, even by acting counter-intuitively, even by submitting out of love to the one who would harm us;

not just being polite or kind to another human being, but seeing that our most basic acts of kindness are more substantial than the stars and planets - things that will outlast them by being part of our relationship with the Incarnate Son. Whatsoever you did for the least of these you did for me - he says - and though you do not remember - I - the One who is alive for ever more - will never forget it.

The faith of Christ - *pistis Christou* - the gift of the Incarnation - is perpetually about the turning of the material into what it was meant to be: the medium for our engagement with the infinite. So Christ continually repeats - you think this is 'just what is happening' but this is a revelation of my interaction with the Father, and by my presence - this - this sickness this wedding this hunger this journey this death - this stuff has become part of that interaction, of that eternal relationship of love...

And the extraordinary encounter of Jacob with an angel reveals this faith to have always been the defining faith of God's People - Israel - the inconceivable possibility of holding and being held by - of grappling with - God Himself. And it highlights again the progression of faith we are called into:

Jacob wrestles with a man, and he comes to believe that this is no mere struggle with flesh and blood, but still, like the Nobleman, he thinks the aim of the struggle is a blessing. Or that he can overpower or control that which he has taken hold of. Yet in the end the blessing he receives, is realised through releasing that which he has genuinely been allowed to grasp; through him being overpowered even wounded by it, the blessing he receives - which will come to fruition in his offspring - is the very realisation, the permanent reminder in his body, that in taking hold of a person, whom he has seen with his eyes, and touched with his hands, he has been taken hold of by God.

In Christ every engagement can be the means of our taking hold of the fullness we cannot hold on to, every encounter can become part of his interaction with the Father and so part of that divine infinity of love - if only we have faith to act out of this reality.

It should not be a surprise, to us, if faith in the Incarnate Word - is defined as the act that turns hope into substance - not just because all faith involves acting as if something not yet seen were true, but because our faith is that in Christ that which is unseen because it is infinite - that which is eternal - is in our midst here and now - the celestial is already among us. And it is known - actually bodily known - in a human life of self-giving love.

It should not be a surprise to us that as the Apostle Paul puts it, faith is only faith if it leads us into love: if 'we have all faith, so that we could remove mountains, but it does not result in love', he says, then it, and we, are nothing. Because in the end, if we want to know what the distinction is between the eternal and the temporal, the things of true faith, and the the stuff of lunacy or fantasy, then we need look no further than love itself. Than the perpetual exchange of giving and receiving that is our Union with the Other.

Ultimately, just as faith is not a belief but an act, so the eternal does not consist in things but in actions - not in objects but in the relationship between subjects. What we *have* is always temporary, what we *do* with what we have can partake in eternity, *and* by being made the fabric of love, by becoming the manifestation of what is not seen, so can all things.

So as we are called to move beyond the faith of the Nobleman towards that of the Centurion - we are not being called to close our eyes to reality, or to let go of our attachment to others - we are not being asked pursue something esoteric or insubstantial - we are being called to see Christ as more than a source of blessing - or the stuff we need - to find in him and in imitating him - a way of living: the blessed life of heaven that is taking all things into itself. We are called to participate in this life by receiving things that can be measured and weighed: gold, time, our very own bodies and using them to create that which is immeasurable, and that which, according to our hope in Christ, will never end: Love.

That is the point of our hope, as we heard on Friday on the Feast of St Luke - to liberate us from the fear of loss which paralyzes us, so that we can act - so we can have faith.

And that is the point of our faith - if it is the faith of Christ - to act in such a way that all temporal things and circumstances - are slowly but surely transformed into the eternal, by becoming the very stuff of loving relationship.

George Michael and Martin Luther are right of course. You have got to have faith. But, as Nietzsche might have asked either of them, even if you have, so what?

So - the Gospel resoundingly replies - that we can, in Christ, spend everything we have, turning everything that is, into that which endures for ever...into Love.

"Love is never overthrown, and never comes to an end; if there are gifts...they will pass away... as, when the perfect comes, the partial will fall aside. But these three remain forever: faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is love."