

SHARP FAITH

SUNDAY THEOLOGY TALKS AT SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE, NYC

18. WHAT IS FAITH?

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1. We have already looked at faith at the beginning of our series *Sharp Faith* when we asked ourselves *How do we know God?*
 - 1.1. We would not be here if in some way God was not *real* for us already.
 - 1.2. And yet, as John says, “Nobody has ever seen God” (1.18), because he is invisible and surpasses our abilities to know.
 - 1.3. It is essential to take the full measure of this point if we want to understand what faith is.
 - 1.4. We take faith for granted – rarely we ask ourselves: Why am I *interested* to God in the first place? Why and how do I speak to someone who I cannot see nor hear? What makes me believe in a personal God rather than a mere divine entity, power, or energy?
 - 1.5. Not to mention *prayer* and especially *praise and thanksgiving*: what draws me to them?
2. Of course there is education, there is culture, and there is a more or less innate tendency toward religion which seems to be an intrinsic dimension of humanity.
 - 2.1. It could be a collective delusion or need.
 - 2.2. Neuroscience tries to map some of the neural underpinnings of religious beliefs.
 - 2.3. In a celebrated book published some ten years ago, the Scottish psychiatrist and philosopher Ian McGilchrist argued that
 - i. dominance of the right hemisphere of the brain (broad attention to reality as a whole, relational approach to the world and others, propensity for representation, metaphors, and poetry)
 - ii. over against the left hemisphere (narrow attention to things to make them work, objectifying of reality, fixity, literalism)
 - iii. is associated with religiosity, meditation, mysticism.¹
3. Then there are what we can call “spiritual experiences”: in history and today many people come to faith as a result of feeling something and attributing this experience to God.
 - 3.1. There is no reason to doubt that these experiences can be caused by God
 - 3.2. And yet spiritual authors have always cautioned against relying on these feelings because they too are inadequate to perceive God – and a progress in acquaintance with God often is accompanied by their disappearance. Cf. the

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¹ Iain McGilchrist *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, Yale University Press 2012.

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writings of St John of the Cross (d. 1591 CE), especially what he calls the “night of the senses”.

4. In other words, feelings can accompany faith, but faith itself is not a feeling.
5. So what is faith?
6. Often when we are asked about our faith, we point to the things we believe, namely *that* there is God, *that* God is One and Three, *that* Jesus is God, *that* Scripture is inspired and so on.
 - 6.1. In theology this is often referred to with a Latin expression, *fides quae*, that is “the things or propositions we believe”.
7. But why do we believe these things? Not because there is any evidence, or fact supporting them.
 - 7.1. We believe these propositions (cf. the Creed) or these things for one reason and one reason only
 - 7.2. Because we *trust* in God.
 - 7.3. If I am told by someone something I cannot verify personally (cf. the doctor who tells me that if I do not take enough exercise I increase the risk of contracting cardio-vascular disease), I will accept what I am told, believe in it, only if I *trust* the person (in this case the doctor).
8. Thus, we talk of faith as *trust*, which the theologians call *fides qua* (“the faith through which or thanks to which we believe everything else”).
9. So let us focus on faith as *trust* – and try to understand what is that makes trust succeed where everything else fails when it comes to God
 - 9.1. If we try to know, feel, perceive, comprehend God we are faced with an impossibility
 - 9.2. If we *trust* God, then we become able to have a certain kind of acquaintance, knowledge, perception of God, and even ‘feel’ God.
10. The best way of understanding what this means is look at the way God reveals himself to us in Scripture, focussing for example on the Gospel of Mark.
11. The first sentence pronounced by Jesus in the Gospel of Mark is

Mark 1:15: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."
12. Apparently here we have what we called the *fides quae*, that is we are told *what* we have to believe: the Gospel – and we think of the Gospel as a collection of propositions, parables, and stories.
 - 12.1. Interestingly, though, when Jesus pronounces this sentence he has not yet said what should be believed by people.
 - 12.2. Then, the introduction to the Gospel of Mark in the Greek text says something that points in a different direction

Mark 1:1: The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
 - 12.3. In Greek this can be translated just as well

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Mark 1:1: The beginning of the gospel *which is* Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

12.4. In other words, before being a collection of propositions, the Gospel, the “Good News” is Jesus, that is “God with us”, “God who has made himself one of us to speak, interact, be in relation with us”.

13. This gives a different spin to the sentence by Jesus I quoted above:

Mark 1:15: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

13.1. “Believe in the Gospel” is an invitation to position oneself in relation to Jesus

13.2. And what it means practically is made clear in the passage that immediately follows this declaration

Mark 1: 16Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. 17And Jesus said to them, “**Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.**” 18And immediately they left their nets and followed him. 19And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.

13.3. “Believing the Gospel” at this stage does not entail ‘propositions to believe’, but instead simply ‘enter into a new relation with Jesus, follow him, be with him’

14. This is crucial to understand what faith is:

14.1. Jesus of course will teach his disciples about God, the kingdom of God, baptism, mission, and many other things (*fides quae*)

14.2. But even before they know and understand these things, the disciples are united to Jesus, walk with him – and God walks with them, simply because they trusted him.

14.3. The Gospel of Mark emphasizes how difficult it was for the disciples to understand what Jesus was teaching, to accept the things Jesus was asking them to believe.

14.4. What matters however is that they remained with him, trusted him, lived with him.

14.5. It is a way of saying: do not worry about all the aspects of Jesus, God, Christianity, the Church you do not understand, or find hard to confess – as long as you trust Jesus, follow him, adhere to him, the rest will come with with time.

15. Faith as trust succeeds where every other ability we might have when it comes to getting to know God fails because

15.1. We do not try to ‘fit’ God to our standards of knowledge

15.2. Not to comprehend him on the basis of what we know

15.3. But we let him progressively unveil himself to us.

16. The leit-motive of Mark is Jesus constant invitation to the disciples to persevere in this openness, this trust – by constantly appealing to their *faith* – here are some examples:

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Mark 4:40: "He said to them, 'Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?'"

Mark 5:34-36: "And he said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.' While he was still speaking, there came from the ruler's house some who said, 'Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the Teacher any further?' But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the ruler of the synagogue, 'Do not fear, only believe.'"

Mark 9:23-24: "And Jesus said to him, 'If you can! All things are possible for one who believes.' Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, 'I believe; help my unbelief!'"

Mark 10:52: "And Jesus said to him, 'Go your way; your faith has made you well.' And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way."

Mark 11:22: "And Jesus answered them, 'Have faith in God.'"

Mark 11:22-24: "And Jesus answered them, 'Have faith in God. Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, "Be taken up and thrown into the sea," and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."

17. When we looked at how faith allows us to get to know God, we saw that it is by a way which is similar to what happens with trust between human beings:²

"*I trust you* is a better compliment than *I love you* because you may not always trust the person you love but you can always love the person you trust."

"When the trust level gets deep enough, people transcend apparent limits, discovering new and awesome abilities of which they were previously unaware."

"Trust is letting go of needing to know all the details before you open your heart."

- 17.1. What is the relation between *trusting* a person and *knowing* someone?
- 17.2. If you need to *trust* it is because you cannot know everything.
- 17.3. Trust creates a bond, increases proximity, familiarity, involvement – ability to know the other person not by *information* but by *acquaintance*.
- 17.4. Trust gives us *assurance, confidence*: the greater my trust, the greater the trustworthiness of the other person becomes - the greater also is the assurance, the confidence.

18. Two other important aspects of faith emerge from the narrative of Mark's Gospel.

19. The first is that it was not the disciples who found Jesus, and decided to follow him, or trust him – on the contrary:

- 19.1. It was Jesus who reached them and called them.

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² From <https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/11-reasons-why-trust-in-a-relationship-is-more-important-than-love/>

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- 19.2. If anything, despite the fact that they followed Jesus, listened to him, were fascinated by him, they could not trust him – right until the end. Hence the constant invitation by Jesus to have faith in him.
- 19.3. This is the basis for the belief that *faith is a gift from God* – and a gift which is never given once for all but needs to be constantly granted by God.
- 19.4. In relation with God we are not in a position of neutrality, neither belief nor unbelief. The Gospels stress that left to ourselves we do not believe, that is we do not trust God.
- 20. Behind this inability to trust God, there is something which the Gospels describe as being blind, unable to hear, paralysed, which is a way of saying that
 - 20.1. Unless God opens our eyes and ears we cannot see or hear him.
 - 20.2. Unless God heals our paralysis, we cannot walk with him.
- 21. We have to trust God to be healed by him – and we have to be healed to trust him.
- 22. We said at the beginning that we tend to take faith for granted: we do not appreciate what miracle it is that we should trust God, want to hear his Word, pray, give thanks and subscribe to the things and propositions that are part of the Christian faith.
- 23. Even when we believe that faith is a gift from God, we tend to think that it was given to us at one point and that now keep believing is up to us.
- 24. In fact, faith is a gift we keep receiving from God – and just as it happens to the disciples in the Gospel, it requires us to keep responding to Jesus' invitation:
 - Mark 1:15: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."
 - 24.1. "repent" is not an accurate translation of the Greek word *metanoete*, which means "turn from one direction to the other" and "turn from one frame of mind to the other".
 - 24.2. What allows us to "turn" in this way is Jesus' continual call "Follow me".