

## FAITH

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*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*  
(Hebrews 11:1).

'I believe in God'. We confidently make our profession of faith. But, do we pause to think what we mean by 'God'? We are ever tempted to construct a God in our own image. And we have attempted to manipulate God. People may have gods in their lives -- they may not recognize them as such, but they worship them. More serious are false images of the true God. God deserves better than the insult of ungracious caricature. It might be argued that the more insidious enemy of God is not atheism but religion. Most atheists reject not God but the travesty God presented by religion and by the conduct of those who profess to worship God. 'I believe' -- we also need to look at what we understand by 'faith'. It has, too often, been reduced to an assent given to a body of 'truths'. This, too, is trivialization of something profound and vital.

True faith is trust in God. We must learn that the God in whom we trust is wondrous, a God of *infinite* love and mercy and forgiveness. A wholly faithful God. We find this God in the Scripture of Israel. His graciousness has been fully revealed in and through the Son. God is now a visible God, if we permit Jesus Christ to image him, if we do let Jesus have *his* say.

### THE OLD TESTAMENT

Because the Hebrew Bible does not really have a word for faith, what we have come to term *faith* is, in the Old Testament, described rather than defined. The description, in the main, concerns the relationship of Israel to Yahweh and the relationship to Yahweh of some key figures in Israel. In both cases the ground of faith is trust in the faithfulness of Yahweh. At its most basic, faith is that attitude which discerns God creatively in action in the world and in human life. This perception urges the commitment of oneself in trust and obedience. The faithfulness of God denotes God's fulfillment of the obligations assumed in creating humankind and, particularly, in the calling of Abraham and the choosing of Israel to be his people. Deuteronomy, repeatedly, makes clear that the choice had nothing to do with anything Israel was, or had done. It was love alone that prompted God's call and the covenant with them that made them God's people (see Deut 4: 32-40; 6: 10-23). God's faithfulness was shown in delivering, saving and vindicating Israel, despite Israel's own failures. God is always free, and God is not predictable -- except that his *hesed*, his covenant-faithfulness, endures. God is respecter of freedom. 'Faith' is, simply, trust in the faithfulness of God.

## Abraham

Abraham was chosen and called -- the 'scandal' of divine election. He was called to serve the divine purpose, and in this service the scandal is resolved. Abraham was summoned to break with his natural ties: country, clan and family (Gen 12:1). He was to get up and go 'to the land that I will show you'. The author of Hebrews has a perceptive comment: 'By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called and set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going' (Heb 11:8).

From the start, Abraham was a man of faith. Yahweh was fully aware of the difficulty of what was asked: Abraham must leave everything. Later, despite his advanced age and that of a barren Sarah, Abraham put his faith in Yahweh, confident that he will, somehow, be ancestor of numberless descendants (Gen 15:5-6). Then there is that 'sacrifice': his readiness to sacrifice the child of promise, Isaac (22:1-19). A poignant story indeed: 'Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love ... and offer him as a burnt offering "... So Abraham rose early in the morning' (22:2-3). The man who had, without hesitation, at the Lord's bidding set out from his homeland now, without question, sets out to do this awful deed. He obeyed with a heavy heart, a heart pierced to the quick by Isaac's unsuspecting question: 'The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' (11:7). The tragic dignity of Abraham and his readiness to give his own son stirred a Christian sentiment. The deed of Abraham has surely coloured the telling of a greater love: 'He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us' (Rom 8:32); 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son' (John 3:16). Abraham had put his faith in God, a seemingly capricious and callous God. For, Abraham saw, what Paul and John were to recognise, that his God, however unpredictable, is to be trusted. God can make outrageous demands because he will ever be faithful. As regards Abraham, the verdict of Paul stands: Abraham is a man of faith (Gal 3:6-9; Rom 4:1-3.)

## The People

God had called Abraham from a welter of nations and had given him the assurance that in him 'all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Gen 12:3). That solemn promise seemed to have foundered in Egyptian bondage (Exodus 1). God will not be gainsaid. As he had called Abraham, now he sends Moses (Ex 3-4). He guided his way and through him delivered his people. That people, on the safe shore of the Red Sea, sang in joyful jubilation to the Lord (Ex 15:1-18). The song resounds with the conviction of a people that had understood that their God was ever the God of the Exodus. The poet, who knew of the unfaithfulness and rebellion of the desert wanderings, had come to accept that it would be the pattern of Israel's future conduct. More significantly, he had discerned, sharply focused against a people's infidelity, the faithfulness of his God:

In your steadfast love you led the people you had redeemed;  
you guided them by your strength to your holy abode (15: 3).

The historical exodus was a petty affair. What really took place is lost forever within the core of a great religious saga. In Exodus 1-15 we read the birth-story of Israel as a people. The whole of Exodus tells of Israel's understanding of itself and its faith. That faith of Israel had discerned in Yahweh's concern for oppressed slaves the true character of a God of salvation. The exodus-saga reflects a long and chequered dialogue between God and people. Today, enlightened by insights of liberation theology, we can observe that the exodus event -- and this remains true even in the saga -- was, first and last, a sociological and political event. Slaves were set free from slavery, delivered from 'a house of bondage' and, eventually, led to a homeland. Later, the poet Second Isaiah, in his drumming-up of some enthusiasm for a return from Babylonian exile, cast the return to freedom as a new Exodus (Is 40: 3-11). The archetypal redemption event was, essentially, a liberation. It is a salutary reminder that our God is not in the business of saving 'souls'; he wants to set *people* free. Salvation has to do with humanness, every aspect of true humanness.

Moses had led the first pilgrimage of the people of God; a journey from slavery to freedom. In biblical tradition, Egypt would remain a symbol of oppression and bondage. The land of Palestine would function as a promise fulfilled. Even when the land was lost, it would re-emerge as a promise of restoration. The pilgrimage was a rough passage and not only because of desert hardship. Throughout Exodus, more markedly in Numbers, there is a struggle between God and people with Moses at the heart of the maelstrom. He did not emerge unscathed (Num 20: 12). Yet it was he who put his finger -- in a challenge to his God -- on the abiding characteristic of the God of the Bible, the goal of pilgrimage:

Forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have pardoned this people, from Egypt even until now (Num 14: 19).

If my God is not a God of steadfast love -- he is not God.

## THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the New testament *faith (pistis)* is a key term that refers, in different ways, to salvation accomplished in Christ. It will suffice, here, to look to Paul. For Paul, faith is that attitude in which, acknowledging one's complete insufficiency and relying utterly on the sufficiency of God, one accepts the revelation and the fact of divine justification in Jesus Christ. The righteousness (*dikaioisyne*) of God is the saving deed by which God restores sinful humankind to his friendship. The life and death of Jesus and his resurrection constitute that decisive event. By his death, Christ has delivered humankind

from sin and by his resurrection has won for us life in the Spirit. We are, then, justified, set right with God and accepted by him, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul, however, adds a special nuance. In Galatians 2:16 he declares: 'We know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faith of Jesus Christ'. While the usual rendering of *pistis Iesou Christou* is 'faith in Jesus', 'the faith of Jesus' is preferable. The faith of Christ is manifested in his obedience to God by his death on the cross. He had trusted himself wholly to the Father. Justification comes from and is based upon that faith of Jesus manifested upon the cross. His faith is a deed of love, a love expressed as self-sacrifice for others. This faith -- faithfulness -- of Jesus Christ is the ground of our faith in Jesus Christ. In Revelation 1:5 Jesus is characterized as 'the faithful witness' -- the one faithful unto death. What we might term 'Christ-faith' encompasses both the faith of Christ and faith in Christ. As Christians, then, our faith is grounded not only on a faithful God but on the trustworthiness of Father and Son. We have reason for confidence indeed. At the end of the day, faith is our yes to God; it is letting God be God in our lives. This being so, our faith should be lived faith -- lived out in love.

Jesus Christ

The object of Christian faith is the person of Jesus Christ who once lived, briefly, on earth, in the first century A.D. and now lives on in the Father's presence. The subject matter of our Gospels is this Jesus Christ. The Gospels, at once historical and theological, proclaim Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ, the definitive revelation of God. The proclaimed Jesus is a construct of Christian theological and spiritual imagination aimed at eliciting a faith response. The proclamation embraces strictly historical elements (e.g. Jesus' death on a cross) and theological interpretation in terms of biblical categories (e.g. ascent to God's right hand).

The real or actual Jesus is the glorified Saviour alive in our midst. He will always be shrouded in mystery. The total reality of any person is unknowable to human discernment -- how much more the reality of the Risen one. The Gospels present us with the 'earthly Jesus': a portrait of Jesus during his life on earth. Their partial, and theologically coloured, pictures serve as a source for the theoretical construct, 'the historical Jesus'. The historical Jesus is not the real Jesus but only a fragmentary hypothetical reconstruction of him by modern means of research. But this reconstruction is of immense importance -- particularly in our day. Jesus is an appealing and challenging figure.

The historical Jesus is not coextensive with the Jesus of the Gospel narratives. There is much in the Gospel narratives that is not historical. The Gospel picture is 'accurate' not in the sense that it is exact in detail but that it is truth-bearing. It is the acceptance of it by the early believing community that guarantees the substantial truth of the gospel account. The Gospel Jesus is more than the historical Jesus, The Gospel presents not only history but

the transhistorical, not only fact but theological interpretation. On the other hand, the ecclesiastical proclamation of the Jesus-image is often less than, is unfaithful to, the historical Jesus in which the image is rooted. And this Jesus has made manifest the trustworthiness of an ever loving God.

### The Love of God

The great peroration of Romans 8:31-39 celebrates the victory of God's love. It is vulnerable love: God 'did not withhold his own Son' (8:32). Having committed himself wholly, he will not tolerate any hitch in his saving purpose. Trials and sufferings of this age will not frustrate love of Father and Son for us (8:35-36). 'We are more than conquerors through him who loved us' (v.37). This love of Christ was concretely shown in his giving himself up to death on our behalf. Paul himself lived his Christian life 'by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal 2:20). He was happy to put his trust wholly in the faithfulness of Christ.

The remarkable declaration of Paul's certainty of salvation (Rom 8:31-39) is a summary of the whole first part of Romans -- and, it might be said, of Paul's Gospel in general. It tells us that God's love is *like this*. It assures us that here is the God who has laid claim to us and has given us a claim on him. We learn at once who God is: He is God *for us*. It is as good a definition of God as we might hope for. God is the loving God who created us and called us to be his daughters and his sons. The question of verse 32 -- 'He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him give us everything else?' -- can have one answer only. The giving of his Son shows, beyond doubt, that God is in deadly earnest. Father and Son were prepared to go to any length to save humankind from itself. God gave his Son without any precondition: God took the risk. The death of the Son was, at the deepest level, a sacrifice made by God.

### Hope

Our Christian life is pilgrimage; we need to be sure that we do not journey towards a mirage. Our comfort: 'We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul' (Heb 6:19). Hope is the other side of faith. Our hope, like our faith, is grounded in the faithfulness of our God, the God we meet in the Son. Our star of hope shines for us beyond suffering, beyond death itself. This is why we run with perseverance the race that is set before us. We look to our role model -- 'looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith' (12:2). Our striving is to become truly children of God, to become authentically human. We can dare to hope that, at the end, a loving Parent will be merciful to all. It is in light of hope, sure and steadfast, that the author of Hebrews characterizes faith as 'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (11:1).

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