

Lent 2

Today we've been hearing about *faith*, from its first manifestation in Peter's recognition of who Jesus is, to a definitive argument of post-reformation Christianity.

In 1994 I flew to Sydney just in time to see my father before he died and then to celebrate his funeral requiem. The Archbishop, Donald Robinson, had been a close childhood friend of my father from their schooldays, and so, scarily, it was the Archbishop who appeared in the sacristy that morning just after I arrived. Seeing an unfamiliar cleric preparing to celebrate Mass in one of his churches, he was at first a little standoffish, but after I introduced myself he warmed up, a bit. Not a famous conversationalist, he got to his point quickly saying, 'I remember the exact time and place where your father accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Saviour', giving me a date and a familiar road name. I was momentarily taken aback: this long-past teenage moment didn't, for me, resonate with the father I had just lost; to the Archbishop it was the correct reaction to a bereavement, to assure me that my father was saved, that he would escape eternal torment. My father had moved a long way from that conservative Evangelical Christianity, but it is one understanding of *faith*: you correctly acknowledge the truth about Jesus and you've ticked the box, you're in. You can read that out of some verses of St Paul. I'd say it's a start, but my Father's journey and the man I knew him to be had already shown me there was a lot more to it than that.

Today's Gospel is the turning point of Mark's account: there at Caesarea Philippi the recognition of who Jesus *is* and his road to the cross intersect. Since Christmas we've had various opportunities in the gospels at Mass to reflect on how Jesus is recognized: at the Epiphany, the Baptism, the wedding feast at Cana and the Transfiguration. More follow in the Easter season, from Mary Magdalen in the garden on Easter morning to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus and the other resurrection appearances.

But today's encounter, what happens after Peter has ticked that box, shows that his recognition of Jesus does not effect a final or complete change in him; this recognition has to face interrogation and correction. There is a whole life of growth and challenge after initial acceptance of who Jesus is. Peter had no difficulty in recognizing and acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ. But he did not accept the price that had to be paid to *be a disciple*, the hard, unsentimental core of Mark's Gospel:

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up

their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

Mark 8.34-46

There is a ‘Peter’ side to each of us, a resistance to following Jesus in practice; it would be so much easier if we only had to tick that box. But as we backslide, and fail, and start again, we know that this active *following* is what faith means; it is a process and a perseverance, not the acceptance of a proposition. Peter shows us precisely how accepting Jesus as your personal Saviour is a beginning, but faith must be *enacted* to be true and to convince, not least ourselves, and that will involve challenge and cost. That process includes failure, as Peter’s life and all our lives show; faith should enhance, not narrow, life experience. It will ebb and flow, change, grow weary and cold and then surprise us again with a fresh and different blossoming. That was my father’s experience and it is mine: Lent is intended to help us with that. Faith is the underlying theme of our lives, not a separate theological compartment; it must bite us where we live, as well as enhancing life.

Today’s other readings elaborate Peter’s imperfect recognition-moment by revisiting the idea of faith with reference to the covenant of Abraham and Paul’s Big Idea about Faith and Works, which is also the cornerstone of a Protestant argument with the rest of us which reckons ‘faith’ as good and works irrelevant. Underlying this argument is a good question which we rarely hear addressed. What exactly *is* faith? If it isn’t just accepting that proposition, ‘Jesus is Lord’, what does it mean, to a first century Jew or to a citizen of the Roman Empire like Paul? Or to us? What did this terminology mean to its early Christian hearers; how did it change their lives so that Christianity even came to be known as The Faith.

Of course, this faith-vocabulary (*pistis* in Greek, *fides* in Latin) had meaning within the wider ancient world: it isn’t a uniquely Christian usage. As a random example, the Roman poet Catullus’ literary hymn to Diana begins *Dianae sumus in fide*, ‘we are in the care of Diana’: here *fides*, translated ‘faith’ in our texts, denotes the relationship of client to patron in both daily life and religion. For Greeks and Romans the word *pistis* or *fides* is used in religion as analogous to a social or legal relationship; it is transactional. A Christian hearer would instinctively know that. But the prominence of ‘faith’ vocabulary in Christian theology, like another of our key words, ‘grace’, the generous giftedness of God’s relationship with us, is in marked contrast to the theology of Judaism or Greek and Roman pagan religions. It reinterprets these ‘faith’

words' core sense of 'trust' and 'trustworthiness' as a description of our relationship with God, to be understood within the familial relationships Jesus promoted, created for each of us by our baptism. The new parent / child relationship with God and the brother / sister relationship with each other are not about patrons and clients but about trustworthy bonds more significant than blood-ties, of which the Mass is the greatest and most abundant pledge.

S James is more help than S Paul here: he reminds us that our faith in Christ is about our daily life, what we do, in our making Jesus' way our own. The Lord forgives our mistakes along the way (and we have the sacrament of penance to help with that), but he continues to call us back to a *faithfulness* which demands solidarity with others, especially the poor and forgotten, and with all our fellow Christians. This is the essential relationship-based character of Christianity which Jesus taught, most familiarly in the Lord's Prayer.

Paul's apparent setting of faith against works is a rhetorical ploy aimed at Jewish listeners like him who regard the Law as paramount (that's clear in the tortured rhetoric of this morning's second reading from Romans). Whenever Paul talks about 'works' he means the Jewish Law, *Torah* (primarily food laws, sabbath and circumcision). As St James observes,
...someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

James 2.18

That describes the taking up of one's cross and following Jesus to which we are called today in the gospel.

Christianity developed the idea of faith as trust *in* God and the trustworthiness *of* God. Faith is how our commitment to that trust and trustworthiness alters our life, behaviour and who, in the end, each of us is going to be before God. We begin the journey at our baptism, we are nourished in it in Christian community by the sacraments, especially here at the altar, and we finish it, if we persevere and grow in love, through our death, with the hope of glory.