

FAITH AND PRACTICE

In the epistle to the Hebrews, we are told that faith is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Heb 11:1) As such, faith is a way of knowing and understanding distinct from our culture’s scientific paradigm. Images of faith are often drawn from the vocabulary of extreme and infinitely extendable dimensions, such as the mustard seed, the spark, and the moving of mountains. Why are such symbolic hyperboles called forth when faith is at stake? That the faith of a mustard seed is enough to move mountains is a way to suggest that faith defies familiar proportions, precautions and expectations. The immensity of the divine and the smallness of the human mysteriously converge in faith. The meeting of extremes that faith invites not only occurs as a striking convergence but also involves a mysterious reciprocity. The divine spark of faith is like a miniscule dot hidden from site, but its core essence actually embraces all that is. In one of the Upanishads, we read that faith is “within the heart, smaller than kernel of rice, smaller than a kernel of barley, smaller than a mustard seed... or the kernel of a canary seed. (The divine) is also myself within the heart, greater than the earth, greater than the sky, greater than heaven, greater than all the worlds.” In a similar vein, God told Abraham that “heaven and earth contain Me not, but the heart of My faithful servant contains me.” Faith, the heart, the divine, such is the chain of knowing and being that links the small things to immense realms and then cancels them all in the sheer unity of being and nothingness. In faith, the infinitely small and the infinitely large meet.

We have been told that nothing is possible without faith and nothing impossible with it. However, how many of us have embraced this mystery wholeheartedly? The Latin verb *credo* (I believe) is from a root meaning “giving the heart.” In all cases, faith amounts to giving one’s heart, not just lending it; and this given ‘heart’ is all that we have and all that we are. Whole heartedly.

Faith is certainly the indispensable condition for any sort of spiritual process, including this contemplative path, but it is also a limitless fulfillment of that process. Faith is the gift of divine light, and faith is also necessary to receive this mysterious gift of the interplay of light and darkness. No human effort, by itself, can make up for faith. And still there is no end without a beginning, no flight without an opening of one's wings. Faith runs through the circle of life that takes one from the beginning to end and beginning again. It bears witness to the presence of the divine in the human. The divine in the human.

An attitude of not-seeing is at the essence of faith. Our perceptual experience is normally of things seen. The experience of *nothing* (no-thing) can be terrifying. The loss of objectified, represented things can seem like an abyss, like darkness rather than light. In our fear, we can feel stripped, abandoned. To receive the gift of faith requires openness, acceptance, listening – a silence emptied of all expectations and projections, an attitude of not-seeing.

Consider, during this Easter season as we approach Pentecost, the story of the Apostle Thomas. Easter Sunday evening, Jesus appears to his disciples and shows them his hands and side. Thomas, for some reason, is absent and refuses to believe what he has not seen. He wants to see and touch the wounds for himself. He wants a direct experience. Eight days later, when Thomas is present, Jesus returns and asks Thomas to touch and feel his wounds. Contrary to what most of us remember, Thomas does not actually do so, but simply cries out, perhaps on a wave of love: “My Lord and my God!” To this comment Jesus replies: “Because you have seen, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” Not-seeing is of the essence. Direct experience is at the core of contemplative practice, but Jesus here shows us that it is necessary for there to be great faith, the faith of not-seeing, as well.

The story of St Therese de Lisieux (1873 – 1897), called the “Little Flower,” who experienced the journey from seeing to not-seeing, to living out of the wound, provides a paradigm of what faith might mean. She died at the age of 24, tuberculosis having led to gangrene of the intestines and excruciating ulcers. Subject to pointless medical treatment, her pain and suffering were overwhelming. Yet, she remained selflessly available. She said: “I am convinced of the uselessness of remedies to cure me, but I have made an agreement with God to bring profit from them to the poor and the sick who have neither the time nor the means to take care of themselves. I have asked God to cure them instead of me through the medicines and the rest that I am obliged take.” During her final months, she experienced a trial of faith in which fog and darkness surrounded her like a wall and left her bereft of all certainties. Yet she maintained throughout her dying an overriding concern for others, continuing to write and to talk, always cheerful and witty, fully of puns and jokes, welcoming and consoling all who came to her bedside. Despite what she experienced as the continuous temptation to disbelief, uncertainty and nihilism, she lived already in heaven. As she put it, “It is all the same to me whether I live or die. I really do not see what I shall have after death that I already do not possess in this life. It is true that I shall see God, but as far as being in God’s presence, I am totally in it here on earth.”

In her contemplative prayer, as in her life, she held that nothing was needed more than to embrace faith and love. All that was necessary was to trust and love with every breath and in every act in each moment. Doing so, one needed only to offer each act and breath to become the means whereby love, compassion and grace might be glorified. It did not matter to her how ineffectual one’s efforts might be. If human beings were not already perfect, God would not ask them to become so. In this regard, she said: “God already sees us in glory and rejoices that we are blessed forever.”

As a child, she had enjoyed deep meditative states in which the mysteries of time and space, divinity and eternity, heaven and earth were revealed to her. All of these were facts to her, and she lived intimately in their reality. Yet, as she continued on her path, as often happens, she entered a great desert of aridity. The revelations and consolations ended, but this did not discourage her. If God had not intended her to realize her contemplative calling, God would not have given it to her. As imperfect, small and ordinary as she felt, she therefore sought a way appropriate to her and to other little souls, “a way that is very straight, short, and totally new.” Elevators had just been invented, and she realized that was just what she needed. She wrote: “I wanted to find an elevator that would raise me to God, for I am too small to climb the rough stairway of perfection. I searched in the scriptures for some signs of this elevator... and I read these words, coming from the mouth of Eternal Wisdom: ‘Whoever is a little one, let him come to me.’”

Something more is at work here than merely the power of simplicity, humility and selflessness, as powerful as they may be. The depth of her contemplative practice has been called by some “heroic compassion” or “the Divine fire of unconditional hospitality”; in other words, the way of living selflessly and unconditionally for others. Faith had come to have no other meaning for her than this. And although more often she no longer experienced the “joy of faith,” she found herself making more “acts of faith” than ever before. She understood, in the words of the great teacher of her Carmelite order, John of the Cross (1542-1591), whom she embraced as her own guide on this path, that “the power to look at God is, for the soul, the power to do works in the grace of God.”

St John of the Cross wrote a longish poem on the experience of God through faith. A few excerpts:

That eternal spring is hidden,
but I know well where it has its rise,
although it is night.

I do not know its origin, nor has it one,
but I know that every origin has come from it,
although it is night.

I know that nothing else is so beautiful,
and that the heavens and the earth drink there,
although it is night.

Its clarity is never darkened,
and I know that every light has come from it,
although it is night.

I know well the spring that flows from this spring,
is mighty in compass and power,
although it is night.

This eternal spring is hidden,
in this living bread for our sake,
although it is night.

This living spring that I long for,
I see in this bread of life,
although it is night.

From the darkness and nothingness (no-thingness) of contemplative practice, we are led by faith to an experience of God.

This union with the Divine is not something that needs to be acquired, but rather, realized. The reality to which the term “union” points is already the present. The unfolding in our lives of this fundamental union is what St John of the Cross called “the union of likeness.” He called God the center of the soul, echoing the

anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, who tells us that “God is your being.” God is, indeed, our being and the ground of all being. If we are to discover for ourselves who we truly are – that innermost being, known before it was formed, ever hidden with the spirit of the Anointed One in God (Ps 139:13, Col 3:03) – the discovery is going to be a manifestation of the ineffable mystery of God. Those who have traveled along the contemplative path are often aware that any sense of separation from God is the result of the accumulation of the thoughts and feelings to which they have become attached. When the mind comes into its own stillness and enters the silent land, the sense of separation can disappear. Union is then seen to be the fundamental reality and separateness only an artificial mental condition. It is the realization this side of death of the fundamental mystery of our existence as the creation of a loving God. Once this depth dimension of life is realized, we can say with Paul that “...it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” (Gal 2:19)

So, during this Easter season, it is important to remember this reality that we *already participate* in the resurrection. If the Christ-spirit is not already alive within you in this very moment, there has been no resurrection; and if it is, then you are *already present* with the Anointed One in God. Heaven touching earth and earth touching heaven.

And, as we approach Pentecost, we can resonate with St Augustine (354-430) who in one of his Pentecost homilies said: “You yourselves are the mystery that is placed on the Lord’s table. Come and receive the mystery that is yourself. To that which you already are, you need only respond, ‘Amen.’”

Amen.