

August 11, 2019

From our reading from the letter to the Hebrews, we hear this statement: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

The assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. What exactly does that mean? Throughout the bible, we hear that faith is important. Do we know what this thing we call faith really is?

St. Augustine of Hippo, back in the 5th century, suggested the idea of "faith seeking understanding." In other words, faith must be present in order to know anything. One must assume, or have faith, in the trustworthiness of the person, thing or idea in order to have a foundation from which to seek further knowledge.

We see this most clearly in the way children learn. For their early years, they place their faith in their parents. They are not intellectually advanced enough to understand how things work, and their limited moral development requires guidance as to what they should do. So, they put their faith, their trust, in their parents. From that foundation of faith, they can then begin to understand the world around them.

So, could we say that “trust” is a good synonym for “faith?” Sure. But in the way that the writer of Hebrews, and Augustine of Hippo, use the term “faith, it seems to mean more than just trust. You could say that faith is the firm ground on which we stand while we try to figure out everything else in this slippery, always shifting, ever changing world. This faith, this firm ground, could be called the treasure mentioned in our Gospel lesson; the treasure after which our hearts must follow.

A few years ago I read a book entitled *Good to Great* by Jim Collins. Among other things, Collins identified something he named the Stockdale Paradox. Admiral Jim Stockdale, was a prisoner of war during the Vietnam War. Collins had interviewed Stockdale at one time and asked him how he was able to live through such a horrible experience, while others seemingly younger and more fit wound up dying in the prison. Stockdale noted that the prisoners who were either complete optimists or complete pessimists had the most trouble surviving. It was the ones like himself that combined realism with a long view that finally made it out. Here is a summation of Stockdale Paradox:

You must retain faith that you will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties.

AND at the same time...

You must confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.

Admiral Stockdale had faith that he would prevail. The ground on which he stood, to endure the horrible reality of being a POW, was faith that he would prevail.

Now, for our purposes, let’s substitute “God will prevail in the end” in the first part: *You must retain faith that God will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties.* This is Christian faith. We stand on the firm ground, regardless of our present reality, that in the end, God will prevail. We trust in the promise given to us in today’s Gospel lesson, that “it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Then, standing on that firm ground of faith, that firm ground of trust in God, that firm ground of the assurance that in the end, God will prevail, we are equipped to confront the troubles of our day to day lives.

Now, when we bring the idea of faith into contemporary Christianity, we run into a problem. Unfortunately, the word “faith” has become understood by many Christians as a synonym for “belief.” Consequently, the test of being a “real” Christian has become that you hold the right set of beliefs.

Let’s take a moment to try to sort this out a bit. Seekers of God begin with two basic questions. The first is “Is there a God?” That question requires a yes or no answer. To ‘have faith’ is to answer yes to this question.

The second question is “What is God?” That is a question of belief, and the answer is going to be complex, and always inadequate. Beliefs are intellectual expressions of our faith. They cannot contain God. They may dance very close, but as with any statement about the nature of God, we have to add, “But God is much more than this.”

A faith statement would be “God is.” Nothing more. God is. That is all we have to say yes to if we desire to begin seeking understanding, of growing our relationship, with God.

Faith has an absolute quality that belief does not. Either you have faith, or you don’t. Either you answer yes or no. There’s no such thing as partial faith. Beliefs, on the other hand, tend to shift depending on the time in history we are in and the cultural setting of the belief system. They also vary according to the abilities of the person. A child’s beliefs will not be the same as an adult.

I am passionate about helping folks discover their faith in God, to find that treasure for which their hearts long. But when it comes to beliefs, I’m a little hesitant to push folks. Yes, I am obligated as your priest to present to you the Church’s teachings regarding various beliefs, and I strive to do that, without adding too many of my sometimes rather strange personal beliefs. But I am always aware that in the end, my personal beliefs might be wrong.

Some of us disagree on some issues within the Church. When push comes to shove, I consider my relationship with each of you much more important than any belief. So, when we disagree, sometimes I say to myself, and to the person with whom I disagree, “Look, if you are right, and I’m wrong, God will prevail. And if I’m right, and you are wrong, God will prevail.”

Beliefs are important, don’t get me wrong. It is our beliefs, our understanding built upon our faith, that guides our actions. But we can allow a diversity of beliefs, of understandings, within our community. It is our faith in God that unites us.

Christianity is not built on intellectual ideas. It is about having a relationship with the living God. Much like children have faith in their parents, we begin by placing our faith in God. And the first step in establishing such a relationship is to say yes to God. Over time, if we nurture this relationship built on faith, our understanding will grow as well.

Let us place our faith in Almighty God, whose good pleasure it is to give us the kingdom.