

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia
on Sunday September 23rd 2007 by the Reverend Alan Neale
“What makes faith possible?”**

Mark chapter nine, verse 24: “The man cried out, ‘Lord I believe, help me overcome my unbelief’”. It really is all there in that one verse... the affirmation that, at heart, in our deepest beings we are people of faith... we are made to be people of faith; the acceptance (sometimes painful) that faith does not come easily at all times; the challenge and the invitation that faith always needs to be growing and developing and, thank God, the encouragement to turn to God and ask for help.

I would be very surprised (and immensely interested) to discover that there were people, even a person, here this morning with whom, in whom, this one verse did not resonate deeply: “Lord I believe, help me overcome my unbelief”.

Today is the third, and final, part of a series of sermons on “Faith” – in early August I preached about the nature, the content of faith... faith not “the faith” (a collection of theological statements), faith not the dependability of another person (“oh you can depend on him/her... he is so faithful”)... but rather the faith which believes and is learning to trust a good God with good purposes.

Last week, I preached about “What makes faith difficult?” and, today, “What makes faith possible?”.

Faith needs companionship and faith needs expression.

Faith needs companionship. Psalm 32, verse 7 “You are my hiding place, you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance”. We need to be surrounded, we need take care to surround ourselves with “songs of deliverance”... with stories of personal faith. Bill Wilson (one of the co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous) writes that the alcoholic needs be surrounded by people who understand and subjected to a constant barrage of information... people of faith need the same... to be surrounded by those who understand and to be subjected to a “constant barrage of information” that will inform and strengthen the soul. Today’s reading from Jeremiah (8:18–19:1) describes our God in pain... “my joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick”. And why such pain? Because the people have not sought “balm in Gilead”, they have not

turned to “the physician of their souls”. Earlier this month we heard the Lord plaintively complain that His people had committed two grave sins: “They have forsaken me the spring of living water and they have carved out for themselves cracked cisterns, cisterns that can hold no water”. Friends, for our faith to grow we must spend time with God and with the people of God. Faith needs companionship. When the great revivalist George Whitefield was asked for permission to print his sermons, he replied, “Certainly... if you will include the fire and the lightning”. It is not enough to read of faith in isolation... we need, our soul craves and feeds upon, being with people of faith. Today’s Psalm (Psalm 79) is surely not one of the cheeriest psalms but note... that despite such calamity and trauma, the person of God is with the people of God... in the house of God... talking and hearing about the things of God. What makes faith possible? It needs companionship!

And, faith needs expression. In his book “Jesus for the Non-Religious”, Bishop Jack Spong writes: “The reality of God can never be defined. It can only be experienced”. And Jean Paul-Sartre writes: “There is no love apart from the deeds of love; no potentiality of love but that which is manifested in loving”. And so it is with faith... the experience of faith, the expression of faith manifested in deeds... all this makes faith possible, all this makes faith grow.

Faith expressed in deed, in action. At a time when Christians were not supported nor always approved by civil authorities, Paul enjoins them, urges them: “Pray for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions”. This is faith expressed in action, in prayer. When Jesus enjoins us to pray for our enemies... there faith is expressed... a faith that God loves all, a faith that God’s will be done, a faith that God cares for the oppressed and will lead them to a place of protection, security and serenity. Whatever else our challenging Gospel for today says to us, it surely says this very clearly... as we are faithful in little things, so our faith will grow and we will be faithful in larger matters. Faith is akin to a muscle that needs be exercised otherwise it will atrophy and become useless. Think for a moment of a situation (two at the most) that confuses and disturbs you. I hope about this matter (or matters) you are praying... perhaps you have found it difficult to pray with faith that all, immediately, completely will be made well... but perhaps you can pray for a slight change, a slight movement and for courage to move out and act in faith. Faith needs expression in deed.

But it also needs expression in word. This past week, I was walking across the Square... late for a lunch appointment. Two men, dressed in office uniform of suit and tie, stopped me... one said, "I've just said to my friend that good works will not get him into heaven". Immediately I replied, "Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved; and receive him into your life as Saviour, Lord and Friend". And then I said, "Sorry... I need be going" and I left. Now possibly, even probably, they were not being too serious and were teasing me a little but as I walked away my soul felt good, my faith was strengthened because I had spoken aloud of my faith in Jesus. Faith to grow needs be expressed in word. You have heard it before, and you will hear it again... Episcopalians are often like the St. Lawrence River... frozen at the mouth... well, at least when it comes to speaking of holy and divine matters, issues of faith. When Psalm 79 begins, in fact for most of the psalm, there is gloom and despondency but at the end there is the beginning of renewed and strengthened faith... "Help us, O God our Saviour, for the glory of your name; deliver us and forgive us our sins, for your Name's sake". The expression of faith to another, in the presence of others... this articulation of faith talk will always lead to a strengthening of faith... it will make faith possible. In the fascinating book "The Preacher and the Presidents", the relationship is described between Dr. Billy Graham and President Richard Nixon - despite profound disappointments, Dr. Graham remained a prayerful and constant friend. And of President Nixon, Dr. Graham would come to suspect "that he would not talk much about faith because there wasn't much to talk about". Ah!

I finish with words I read earlier this week... I hope their simplicity will not offend you. "There should be joy in living the spiritual life. A faith without joy is not entirely genuine. If you are not happier as a result of your faith, there is probably something wrong with it. Faith in God should bring you a deep feeling of happiness and security, no matter what happens on the surface of your life". Ummmm...

I invite you to be impatient with a faith that is anything less... I invite you to pray, "Lord I believe, help me overcome my unbelief"... I invite you to come talk and pray with me for I promise you that God wants our faith in Him to grow... faith in a good God with good purposes for me, for you, for us.

Alleluia. Amen

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