

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 19 Year C 2019

The second reading placed before us today from the Letter to the Hebrews offers us one of the most magnificent reflections in all the scriptures on faith. The letter, by an unknown author, shows us someone who had a clear understanding of the Jewish belief and its scriptures and its sacred stories. This eloquent portion from Hebrews, really giving us a grand overview of the entire Old Testament narrative; really a hymn in praise of faith. And if any of us need reminding who are the key players in the story of Israel, then this portion from the letter to the Hebrews gives us such a helpful snapshot of who they are and their contribution to the story of our faith.

But faith, as we know only too well, is perhaps one of the most controverted subjects today. The so-called 'new atheists' have been vocal and visible in recent years. And on a regular basis, and as a matter of course, they denounce and attack faith and people of faith. And typically, these 'new atheists' and their supporters characterize faith as naivety, superstition, as a whole lot of pre-scientific mumbo jumbo, as bronze age mythology. And that idea is not restricted to the hard-line, fundamentalist 'new atheists', but in fact is now mainstream: in media, in education, in the wider culture. The young – including the young people in our parish – are exposed to this as a matter of course. Most of you here would have had the advantage of a culture at least tolerant or sympathetic to faith. For our young ones today, this is not the case. Their education and the culture that surrounds them is hostile to faith. In part because faith is considered, if not dangerous, then *sub-rational* and therefore unworthy of mature people.

That's why our young folk need your support and encouragement and example! Don't imagine the faith of the next generation can be nurtured without *you*. A future generation of believers won't emerge by accident or by complacency! Because the pressure is on. Christopher Hitchens (one of the darlings of the new atheists) has said people of faith need to 'let go of their childish preoccupations. They need to grow up!' And this, but a variation on the usual objection that faith is just silly superstition. This is what our young folk every day as a matter of course.

But if we look at some of the great people of our faith - St Paul, St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, St Bonaventure, Ignatius of Loyola, Richard Hooker, Thomas More, John Henry Newman, Edith Stein, Dorothy Day, C S Lewis - say what you want about these people. But the one thing you couldn't say about them is that they were unintelligent!

Straight away that should give lie to the charge that faith is merely a case of naivety or immaturity or lack of intelligence. *Are there* unintelligent people of faith? Sure! I encounter them almost every day.... But to say that faith, *as such*, is unintelligent really does not hold up when we honestly look at the striking figures from our history of faith.

Now the cry of the new atheists and the rest is for us 'to know', because faith – they argue - keeps us in ignorance. And their model of knowledge is science: modern, analytical science. Science is a good thing, of course. It illumines many important aspects of reality. But science is an analytical form of reason. The scientist takes the object they are examining, puts on the spotlight, takes it apart, and this leads to a certain understanding. Am I bad mouthing science? No! But science, such as it is, only gives us *a certain kind* of knowledge. Questions of faith and questions of science have different tools – and disciplines – to address the questions before them. To confuse them is like having an optometrist use the tools of a dentist! It really won't improve our vision... Different questions. Different tools. Different disciplines.

When we start thinking about the question of God, the one thing God is not, is a 'thing', a substance, an object in the world. The creator of the universe is not an object in the universe. So, God, in principle cannot be examined or known, through usual scientific analysis. We know the question - we might have even asked it yourself - *give me the evidence for God!* As if physical traces for God could be found; as if scientific experiments could somehow be performed that would reveal to us God's existence; as if God were kind of the Loch Ness monster: some say its real some say its not. So, we need to test, examine to see if it is true. But that's exactly what God *is not*. Are their rational ways to apprehend God? Absolutely! But they are not scientific. They can't be. Because God does not correspond to that style of analysis.

So, what is the right approach to God? Well, simply: the approach of faith. Does that mean naivety? Does that mean irrationality? No. *But faith is the appropriately rational way of approaching God.* John Henry Newman said, '*faith is the reasoning of a religious mind.*' The way a religious mind reasons is by faith. Because God cannot be placed under the bright light of analytical reason, it's much more of a questing or a searching reason. In this life, God cannot be seen and examined as an object. So, the proper response to God is faith.

In the epistle placed before us today we see how the great figures of Israel's history related to God. And we see how that relationship had to be one of faith and not *control*. It's the same principle. God can't be controlled, analysed, seen, pinned down on the table. By faith Abraham obeyed... He went out *not knowing where he was to go*. And so, the key to understanding Abraham's relationship with God is that it was built on trust. Not irrationality. Not superstition. Not that. But the only proper response to God who reveals himself to Abraham as a person - inviting him into relationship with him - is trust. *By faith Abraham received power to generate even though he past the normal age. And Sarah herself was sterile. For he thought that one who had made the promise was....trustworthy.* There for us is a description of faith! As the story is told to us in Genesis, both Abraham and Sarah were well past 'it' and so the idea that he was to father a nation, we might say was somewhat unreasonable. But Abraham knew that the one who made the promise was trustworthy and so he had faith. Was he acting stupidly or irrationally? No. Because it was the reasoning, the right-reasoning of a religious mind. *And so, it came forth from one man, who himself was as good as dead, descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and as countless as the sands on the seashore.*

Faith, my brothers and sisters, is the right-reasoning of a religious mind. It's an act of *trust* in God's providence. And, *it gives rise to life*. If you take the plunge, if you trust in God, you will find life! And life, as the gospels tell us, in abundance! Life you never dreamed possible. But faith is not only a matter of 'believing in God.' Faith is not just, 'I will trust in God.' As we see in the story of Abraham, it's also when God makes an impossible demand: *By faith when he was put the test, offered up Isaac.* And this only son was to be the father of nations. Faith, then, is a hoping against hope. It's trusting when it seems there is no ground for trust. Faith is the *radical act* of turning your whole life over to God. Is that irrational? No! Is that superstition? No!! But *it is an act of surrender to a mystery that we cannot in principle control.* That is why faith, in the biblical tradition, leads us to life. And this is what the great heroes of our faith show us again and again: faith is giving ourselves over to the mystery of God who is the source of all life. We are not captive to bronze age myths. We are not slaves to superstition. That really, the message of the gospel today as well: Jesus exhorting us to surrender to the providential mercy and direction of God. He is asking us to have faith. When we give ourselves over in trust to the mystery of God, God defies our limitations, and brings us to life. Amen.