

August 18, 2019
Jeremiah, Hebrews 11, Luke 12

When we are little children, we believe what our parents and teachers tell us. When we are teenagers, we believe what our friends say. As adults, we turn to experts, seeking their advice. How much we depend throughout life on those authorities whom we must trust! In every stage of life, we take things on faith. That is entirely natural. We are creatures, not the Creator. None of us can know all the facts; we have to trust that things will be thus and so as others say who have investigated and acquired wisdom. None of us can acquire expertise in everything; we have to trust the relevant authorities. For good or ill, faith is basic to life. It is also the most basic problem in life. Parents can err, teachers mislead, peers betray, experts deceive, self-deceive or be negligent. Bitter experience teaches: it is hard to believe again, once our trust has been shattered. All the more so in religion, especially it seems these days in a time of widespread religious disillusionment.

In the midst of our confusion, the Letter to the Hebrews today calls us to look to Jesus, “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” Jesus joyfully lived and died by faith –faith which God vindicated on Easter morn by raising his crucified Son. Jesus is the one who believed in God on our behalf, when we were faithless, all the way to dying on the cross in a place that was not his but rather ours. Now by his Spirit the risen Christ gives us the same faith by which we too endure the cross and disregard the shame, and look ahead instead to the eternal joy of God with all his redeemed humanity.

True faith is in Christ alone. But Christ is never alone. He is always with his faithful people, who share in his faith. This great 11th chapter in the Epistle to the Hebrews recalls the faithful of the Old Testament, “who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.” Not that faith always experiences such manifest victories in the eyes of this world. Even victorious faith is faith that has been embattled, looking away from present circumstances, in conflict with other loyalties and values, and, yes, frankly it not infrequently experiences defeat in this world at the hands of sin, death and devil. That’s why Jesus in today’s gospel reading challenges his followers, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” And he warns that the dividing line between faith and unbelief can cut right through the most intimate relationships: “they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

Whether in victory or defeat, faith is always embattled, always under the shadow of the cross, always making martyrs who would rather suffer and die than renounce God. So the letter to the Hebrews acknowledges: “Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented-- of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.” Because faith can and does suffer

defeats like this in the world, embattled believers look all the more to Jesus and his great crowd of witnesses when hard times before the. "My faith looks up to thee," we sing, because faith "looks to Jesus, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."

So here we have a test, whether faith is true: does it follow Jesus through the cross to the crown? Does it motivate us to "lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and run with perseverance the race that is set before us?" "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" Jesus exclaims today. "I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!" See here the faith of Jesus in action, straining on to his great battle on our behalf with all the forces of evil besieging him. Cross and resurrection: that is the path he pioneers, the way which we follow by faith in him, the way of daily putting the old Adam to death and rising up the new creature in Christ, "laying aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, to run with perseverance the race that is set before us." It is false faith denies the struggle, evades the battle, claims victory prematurely, or succumbs to defeat likewise prematurely.

So Jesus today cries out to the religious leaders of his day, "You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" And Jeremiah the prophet expressed dismay and anger at the false preachers of his day who claim to have dreams and revelations and to speak in God's name. Like Jesus, Jeremiah warns against the spiritual pride of preachers who confuse their own spirit with God's Spirit. Claims to dreams and revelations may impress

human beings, but God sees through all human magic and superstition, deception and self-deception. God sees into the preacher's heart and God knows who is the fake is, especially the religious leaders who sin by taking God's name in vain, using God for their own purpose and so causing harm to God's reputation. Both Jesus and Jeremiah remind us of the second commandment charging us not to take any religious claims at face value but rather to test the spirits, to see whether they are of God. Is it faith which follows Jesus through the cross to the crown? Then it is true. Is it faith which denies the struggle and evades the battle? Then it is false.

It is hard to believe again, if once our trust has been betrayed. We want to know whom to trust. In the midst of all confusion, we look again and again to Jesus, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God." We look to Christ, not Christians, or better, we look at Christians, ourselves included, clothed and covered in Christ.

For we know that our righteousness in this life consists for the most part in the forgiveness of sins, and that progress, however real, is imperfect until we are perfected forever by God on the day of the resurrection. In the meantime, the church is a public hospital for recovering sinners, nor a private club for the perfect. Martin Luther put it this way: God forgives all sin, if only it displeases us, then they are no longer our sins but Christ's, and his righteousness is ours in turn. This Christ, who takes our doubt and confusion to give us his faith and joy in God, is the one whom we can really trust in life and in death. Where Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, is proclaimed, there is the church of God and the certainty of faith, which does not rest in its own feelings, experiences, or

convictions but on Christ. So we recognize true faith in ourselves and others: when sin displeases, and the resolve and conviction arises in us by the Holy Spirit, to “lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, to run with perseverance the race that is set before us,” singing joyfully all the way glory to God for all his rich mercy in Christ!