

THE FAITH THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

INTRODUCTION

Jesus was having a meal with a group of highly respectable men when suddenly a woman - uninvited and unexpected - burst into the room where they gathered. She was quite obviously emotionally upset. Her behavior bordered on hysteria. She went straight to Jesus. She had a box of expensive ointment which she proceeded to break and pour on his head. She was weeping and as she knelt at his feet tears fell upon them, and she wiped them with her own hair.

The men in the room were shocked - shocked by the woman's unconventional behavior, and also shocked by the way Jesus accepted this strange behavior. They knew of this woman. They knew that her reputation was not good. They told Jesus quite bluntly what they thought both of her and his acceptance of her behavior. Whereupon Jesus looked at the woman and said "Thy sins are forgiven". This was the last straw as far as they were concerned and they said to each other, Who is this who presumes to have the power and the right to forgive sins? Then Jesus looking at the woman again said to her "Thy faith hath saved thee. Go in peace".

DEVELOPMENT

Our attention here falls upon the word "faith". "Thy faith hath saved thee" This word "faith" is another one of those words of one syllable which together with words like sin, grace, hope, love, and cross form the vertebrae of the Christian vocabulary. Isn't it true that words that are in constant use, as these words have been for hundreds of years, have a way of losing some of their sheen and power. Somehow or other, as they are used generation after generation, they have a way of becoming flabby, hackneyed, and sometimes debased and devalued.

For instance, take this word "faith". We use this word freely, and often in different ways. It means different things to different people. It's lost something of its original flavor. "Faith" - which in the early days and at particular times in Christian history has been like a great trumpet blast, now is often used for so many different things that it is not much more sometimes than the sound of a tin whistle.

WHAT JESUS DID NOT MEAN

When Jesus said to this woman, "Thy faith hath saved thee" what exactly did he mean? Suppose we begin by considering what he did not mean.

To begin with, he did not mean that her "gullibility" had saved her - that is, her willingness to accept something completely irrational for which there is no evidence at all. This, I think, is what some people mean by faith; this is what some people think the Christians mean by it - a willingness to believe something in spite of the evidence to the contrary.

And in the second place, Jesus did not mean when he said to the woman "Thy faith hath saved thee" that her self-confidence had saved her. We can be safe in saying that he was not saying that what had saved her and brought her into a new existence was her confidence in her own powers of recovery. She may have had such confidence, but this is not what saved her life.

Faith, of course, means this to a great many people. And I am not saying that it is right or wrong to use the word faith on occasion to mean this. This is what some people mean by faith, and they say something like this: "If you want to succeed in life and get ahead in business, you have to have confidence and faith in yourself. You have to build up yourself on the inside in your own eyes. You have to communicate this confidence to others in order to get ahead". To be sure, there is a large element of truth in this, but this is not what Jesus had in mind when he said "Thy faith hath saved thee".

And this too - he did not mean by faith the willingness to launch out into deep waters not really knowing just how deep those waters are - the willingness to go ahead, not in spite of the evidence, but rather in spite of the uncertainties - to take risks, to make the plunge, so to speak. This, I feel, is very precious in human life, essential for progress, but this is not exactly what Jesus had in mind when he said to this woman "Thy faith hath saved thee".

BACK TO THE WOMAN

Let's go back to the woman for a few moments. Undoubtedly this woman had heard things about him. You couldn't have lived in the same country at that time, and not heard about him. She - with a rather gory record behind her, and wondering whether there was any chance of turning that record into the opposite direction and living a different kind of life, had heard that there was someone who could rehabilitate people who had run aground. She believed what she heard. She didn't have much evidence. Perhaps her only evidence was some other person who had been rehabilitated by him and who had told her about him.

And then one day she heard. There came a time when she encountered him and, standing on the edge of the crowd and not daring to go very deeply into it because of her life, her reputation and character, perhaps she heard him tell the story of the wayward boy who went into the far country and wasted all of his living, not only his money but also his life, his energies, his talents, and then returned home and found his father not only waiting to receive at the door, but also running out to meet him. She believed it. Perhaps she heard him say that there was more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than ninety-nine people who needed no repentance. She believed it. She believed in him - with both mind and heart. The people who knew her well probably thought she was losing her mind, but she went right ahead. She burst into the room where these respectable men from the community were seated with Jesus having a meal. She broke her alabaster box. She broke all of the rules of normal behavior. She broke her heart in public. And she who was broken went out whole. It was her belief, her trust in him and in what he said, her faith in a loving and forgiving God that made the difference.

WHAT JESUS MEANT BY FAITH

When Jesus, therefore, says to us have faith in God - he is not saying believe in something that is completely irrational for which there is no evidence at all. Nor is he saying, believe only in yourself and in your own powers. Nor is he saying believe in the possibility of the impossible, no matter how impossible it all may seem.

When he is saying "have faith in God", he is saying to us believe what the people who have known God and who have been close to him have to say. One man, Isaiah, knew him well and once said "I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne - high and lifted up - and his train filled the temple". Believe it. Believe that in spite of all of the changes and chances of life, over and above all of the comings and goings, there is one who sits above it all - changeless, abiding. Another one who had passed through deep waters once said, "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." Believe it. Another one who had been close to God, long before Jesus lived, said "If with all your hearts you truly seek him, you shall surely find him". Believe it.

But Jesus is implying even more than that. Some people, perhaps, would not take this next step, but I think that when Jesus says to us "have faith in God" he is saying believe not only what these men of the past have said, but believe also what I say to you. When I tell you that the hairs on your head are numbered, believe me. When I tell you that the pure in heart shall see God, believe me. When I tell you that those that mourn shall be comforted, believe me. When I tell you that in my Father's House are many mansions, believe me. When I tell you that those who have seen me have the Father, believe me. When I say that men cannot live by bread alone, believe me. It may not look as though it were so. It may appear to you that bread is the one essential fact of life, and that everything in life can be reduced to material terms such as bread, clothes, money and what have you. When I say seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all of these things shall be given unto you, believe me. Trust me.

Break through the conventional patterns of the society of your day. Break out of your own little hard shell of fear, and timidity and self-centeredness. Break loose from the pillars to which you are bound, the old stand bys of your knowledge, your patterns of life. Come with me. Take up your cross and follow me. Your life - lose it - for my sake. Believe me - if you do, you will find a new life that far excels anything you ever had before.

BUT....HOW CAN I BE SURE? But you still say....how can I be sure. There are so many others voices that are calling, so many other possibilities that unsettle me, so many other facts that seem to deny what Jesus had to say. How can I know? And how can I be sure.

Think of it this way. When we were children, somewhere along the line, someone told us that the earth was round. It certainly didn't look that way to us. It looked flat. What we were told seemed to contradict what we saw. But we believed what we were told, because we believed in the person who told us. Perhaps it was a father or a mother, or a teacher we loved, trusted and respected. As we grew up, we discovered that a great many other people believed the same thing and from time to time in our own personal experience, we saw things that confirmed what we had been told to believe. Perhaps one day, as though to confirm our knowledge, we traveled further and further in one direction until we encircled the globe and came back to the very place from where we had started. We knew then beyond any measure of doubt that what

we had been told to believe was true. We began by believing. We came to know.

I would like to think that essentially the same sort of thing happens in the matters of our faith. The issues here, of course, are not quite as simple as they are in the physical world. But in the beginning we are told certain things (1) that there is a God. (2) that he is the source of all life (3) that he made us (4) that he loves us (5) that this same God once came into the world where you and I live (6) that he died in this world in order to save it.

You begin believing these things and believing the person who tells you. As you grow up, different things may happen. You may find that none of the facts seem to confirm what you have been taught to believe, and so you set it to one side. Or, as you grow up, you may find that in spite of some facts that make it difficult to believe, nevertheless, there are other things, fragments of person experience that seem to undergird it, confirm it, and little by little - believing, trusting, and walking in this way, you come to the point where suddenly you see it all. It all fits together and makes sense. You see Jesus, the man from Nazareth, as the greatest revelation of God in human terms that we have ever had. You see too that the cross is the way to life. That in Christ, God was at work in our world trying to bring the world back to himself by redeeming the lives of people. You begin by believing. By trusting. By having faith. You come to know. And this - this is THE faith - the faith that makes all the difference in the world.

LET US PRAY: Let us be still and remember Jesus as he was then, powerful to heal the sick and to save the broken. Let us remember him as he is now, powerful as the Spirit of God among us, to lift us out of the low places and set our feet again on the high way. O God, Our Father, draw us to him who is the perfect incarnation of thyself, that our power may more and more be tamed by the great power of his love. It is this faith in Thee, revealed in his life, that we ask for in these moments. Amen

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For instance, take this word "faith". We use this word freely and often in different ways. It has, to my way of thinking, lost something of its old and original power. I suppose you could say it's been devaluated. Faith which in the early days and at particular times in Christian history has been like a trumpet call, now is often used for so many different things that it is not much more sometimes than the sound of a tin whistle.

WHAT JESUS DID NOT MEAN And Jesus said to this woman "Thy faith hath saved thee" "Go in peace". What did he mean. Well, suppose we consider what he did not mean.

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