

## FAITH - THE KEY TO VICTORY

Easter 6 Year b

Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-6; Jn. 15:9-17

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We live in a culture, today, that emphasises the individual's freedom to determine the course of his or her own life. This freedom, naturally, extends to each person's particular system of belief. Our culture is also typified by a widespread distrust of historical facts, particularly biblical facts. How can we know anything, with certainty, about the past? The events of history are tinted by and interpreted through our own particular cultural perspectives, and our own pre-conceptions. Therefore, we only believe certain things because we want to believe them. That is; if it makes sense to me, then I will believe it, whether it happens to be objectively true or not.

Truth then becomes what I believe it to be, without any absolutes. I am free to believe what I want and you are free to believe what you want. So, all that is left to us is the experience of believing—anything or nothing, as the whim takes us. All that we have left, then, to give meaning to our lives is our subjective experience of believing whatever we like. What becomes important in life, then, is the journey rather than the final goal. The journey is everything, because there can no longer be a destination. Our culture has lost the necessity of an object for faith. This is the cultural vacuum of our society, into which John's letter speaks.

The readings from last week demonstrated that the assurance of love is found in faith. Although we cannot see God and are unable to determine tangible proofs for our abiding in him and he in us, nevertheless we can have the confidence in accepting this truth because of our faith. But what is the substance of our faith? How does our faith give us the assurance of his love for us and our inclusion in God's family? Well, the nature and effects of Christian faith are all directly related to the grounds of assurance that John has been expounding in chapter 4 of his first letter. Faith that does not lead to love is meaningless. Love that is not based on faith is useless. It lacks any substance.

For Christians neither faith nor love are optional extras—they are the twin pillars on which all true Christian experience rests. The two greatest commandments, attested to, by Jesus Christ himself, were “to love God with all your heart soul mind and strength” and to “love your neighbour as yourself”. On these two great commandments hangs all the teaching of, not only the Old Testament, but also the New Testament. Faith, then, according to John, is not a subjective feeling, but rests on a solid foundation. And that solid foundation is, of course, the person of Jesus Christ.

When the scripture discusses faith, it always emphasises the object of faith, not the subjective experience of believing. What this means is, that faith or belief is never an end in itself. A person cannot truly say that they have faith, unless it is faith in something.

Sometimes we may come across people who say, “I wish I could have faith.” The content of that faith doesn’t appear to matter to them. They are looking for an experience, any experience, to give some meaning and authenticity to their existence. But it is not “faith” as an abstract idea that John addresses. Our faith has a distinct and irreducible content. Christians believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. That is not just an article of faith, it is the faith. And it is this alone that makes a person a Christian. Jesus Christ must be the object of our faith.

The biblical commentator, Robert Plummer, states: “To believe that Jesus is the Christ is to believe that One who was known as a man fulfilled a known and divine commission; that He who was born and was crucified is the Anointed, the Messiah of Israel, the Saviour of the world. To believe this is to accept both the Old and the New Testaments; it is to believe that Jesus is what he claimed to be, One who is equal with the Father, and as such demands of every believer the absolute surrender of self to him.” (Jackman, 136)

We face many challenges in proclaiming Jesus as the Christ of faith to a generation whose only certainty is that if you are sure of anything then you are certainly wrong. John’s view of faith is not believing against hope, but exercising faith so that we know we have eternal life. We need to understand that it is God who takes the initiative in the Christian’s new birth—the work of salvation. Faith is both God’s gift and the first active sign of our new life in him, as we confess that Jesus is the Christ.

This point can be illustrated in Jesus’ raising of Lazarus, who, having been buried for four days, came out of his tomb in response to the command of Jesus. But it was not his ability to hear Jesus’ voice that prompted him to come out, because, as he was dead, he wouldn’t have been able to respond to even the loudest voice. The answer lays in the power of the One who spoke and in the authority of his word. Just as God created light with a word (Gen. 1:3), so he re-creates spiritual life. He brings the dead to life by his powerful word. Therefore, it is God who enables us to believe.

A.W. Tozer states: “The faith that saves reposes in the person of Christ; it leads at once to a committal of the total being to Christ, an act impossible to natural man. To believe rightly is as much a miracle as was the coming forth of dead Lazarus at the command of Christ.”

To sum up, then, we can say that our Faith is focussed in the confession that Jesus is the Christ. It is our belief in the faithfulness of God to achieve for us what he has promised—that is; our justification, our freedom from the consequences of sin, and our sanctification in Christ—through the work of Christ, in his birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension. It is our belief that the work of Christ does have a lasting significance, for us.

But while the nature of faith is found in our trust in the faithfulness of God; unless it is exercised in our lives, it is useless. As both the apostles, James and John, teach us, “Faith without works is dead.” As a consequence of this, then, we find that the effects of faith are characteristics of Christian discipleship.

The demonstration of Christian faith through our actions, are not chores to be endured, they are characteristics to be lived. A chore is something that we do through our effort in order to achieve something. A characteristic is something that is determined by who we are by the grace of God in the work of Christ. The three characteristics of Christian faith that John points to are: love, obedience and victory.

As soon as we realise what has happened to us through our new birth in Christ, our response should be one of gratitude and love to God. God has now become our Father and we are his children, members of his family. And so we express our gratitude to God for what he has done for us in the way in which we show love for all his children. Without love for our Christian brothers and sisters, our claim of love for God is meaningless. It's a lie.

Christians, however, should not so much *try* to love, as love is a "given" characteristic of the Christian's new nature. It is our nature, as Christians, to love. It's not a duty that we have to fulfil, it's a characteristic of real Christianity, without which no-one can claim to be truly born again.

However, not only is obedience to God's commands related to love, as an evidence of faith, it is actually the way in which we love God. We show our love for God by being obedient to him. It's this that gives love its moral fibre. Love is not just an emotion or feeling, it's an act of *our* will to comply with *God's* will. We need to remember this, because we live in a generation where the sovereignty of emotions and feelings has come to mean that even the word "love" has been emptied of its moral content.

However, for us, obedience to God's law is not so much an external matter of moral duty, as you might want to please a dearly loved Father. It's this that lies at the heart of our Christian discipleship. The glory of our new relationship with God is our inner love for him which prompts obedience. The heartbeat of God's love for us is sacrifice, and there is no other sort of love with which we can respond to his initiative. To profess love for God but fail to obey his commands is a nonsense.

His commands are the means by which we live in freedom and fulfilment, as God intended us to do. In the gospel accounts, Jesus contrasted his commands with the heavy load of legalism with which the Pharisees burdened the people. All they could do was cripple and paralyse and burden the consciences of those who could never fulfil the requirements. Christ's commands, however, are for our good and God gives us the strength to do what he has commanded. We would hardly be commanded to love God and our neighbour if love were not a function of God's will for us.

Obedience, then, is the second characteristic of Christian discipleship. By abiding in Christ, by faith, in obedience, we are then able to have victory over sin. Victory, then, is the third and last characteristic evidence of true faith in a Christian's life and experience.

The clearest feature of the evil that influences our world, according to John, is the denial that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Ever since the Fall of creation, the enemy's tactics were to destroy the people of God and so prevent the coming of the Christ. His attempts failed. So, the next best thing was to have people deny that Jesus is the Christ, the Saviour of humanity.

It is our faith in God, through the work of Christ, then, that provides the way to Christian victory. But it's not our believing that is the means by which victory over the world is achieved. It's achieved through the faithfulness of God in accomplishing victory for us through his death on the cross and subsequent resurrection and ascension. We have the victory because Christ has already overcome the world. The conflict is not over but the outcome is settled and nothing in this world or beyond it can overcome the believer who is grounded in Christ. All those who are united to Christ by faith, have also overcome.

Our problem is usually in believing that this is true. It's only as we grasp who Jesus really is and what power he has that all the apparent superiority of evil is put into its true perspective.

Christians often find themselves sinking into a depressive state of self-analysis, where our own subjective feelings (or lack of them) tyrannise us into thinking we cannot be truly Christ's. In such a condition we take evidences such as love for God and our fellow believers, seen in obedience to his commands, and try to use them as a stick to beat ourselves into becoming better Christians. We often don't feel sufficient love for others and so, perhaps, we begin to doubt whether we really are born again. But, if these qualities of Christian discipleship are present, we can know that our love for God and our love for other Christians is genuine, whatever feelings we may or may not have. God calls us to a life of faith, demonstrated by love for him and for one another, by obedience to his commands and by victory over the world. As we exercise that faith, we find that it works. God keeps his promises and fulfils his word.

Who is he who has overcome the world? None other than Jesus Christ, who through his baptism, declared his unity with fallen humanity and through his death, procured for us forgiveness and new life. It's through this One, and in him, that we are able to love God and our neighbour, that we are able to be obedient to his will and that we are able to receive victory over evil. And it is through the testimony of the Spirit that we can have the assurance of his love for us and our love for him. It is Jesus, through his demonstration of love for us, and his Spirit that now lives in us, who is the sole object of our faith.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and praise. Amen.