

A Faith of Our Own

Text: St. Mark 9:24

The words of our text are the desperate cry of a father deeply distressed by the grave illness of his son. He pleaded with Jesus, "If it is possible, help me." Our Lord replied, "Everything is possible to those who have faith." The man's answer was a further cry for help, "I have faith. Help me where faith falls short." In the King James Version of the Scriptures, the man's words are, "Lord, I believe. Help Thou mine unbelief."

Now, there are believers and unbelievers outside us. We know that, for we meet them every day. But there is also a believer and unbeliever under our own skin. Neither our belief nor our unbelief is pure. We live a life of faith diversified by doubt, or a life of doubt diversified by faith. Malcolm Muggeridge once described his life-long friend Alec Vidler as "the quintessential Anglican, who loves God with his whole heart and doubts Him with his whole mind."

I know that some of you are like that because you have told me so. What I am saying to you now is in response to your letters to me and your conversations with me. You feel both the attraction of belief and the appeal of unbelief, and that makes you more than a little uncomfortable to be here. For one thing, you don't want others to take your presence to mean more than it does. Your being here does not mean that you are a person of deep faith, and you are uneasy that others might think it does. Indeed, your presence seems to affirm too much even to you. When you hear the confident words of the anthem, or hymns, or preacher, or creed, they express a certainty you do not feel. Much of what is affirmed in the service is addressed to a faith you do not have. The message does not find you. You know it touches others with enormous power, but you come to church and find yourself a spectator rather than a participant. You could say of faith what George Eliot said of music, that it carried a letter not addressed to her. You would like to believe with your whole heart, but you can't, and you can't pretend to, either.

And yet you are here. And you are here because to stay away would also affirm too much; for there is a part of you that believes, and it seems only honest to acknowledge it and give the believing part of you a chance. For some, there is a wistfulness in their being here, and a hope that something might happen in worship to lead them from their half-belief to confidence and joy in the faith.

And then we hear the words of our text, which seems to gather into itself our belief and unbelief, our lack of faith and our longing to have it. And we are relieved and comforted to discover one person who, feeling as we do, brought his experience to Jesus and was not rejected.

Indeed, the usefulness of our text goes further even than that. It not only helps us by clearly describing our condition; it presents us with a forthright and wholesome way of dealing with it. It not only describes where we are, but shows us how to get from where we are to where we should like to be.

I. Notice, to begin with, the frankness of the man's words.

A Faith of Our Own

There is neither pretense nor pretension in them. Nothing is disguised or concealed—there is no dissimulation, only directness and honesty. He describes his feelings as clearly as he understands them.

Now it seems to me that one of the differences between genuine piety, and what we know as pietism, is just this sort of realism. Pietism dwells in a contented world of faith where there is never a doubt or question; where everything is clear, obvious and assured; where no one is ever perplexed or confused. For this very reason it seems an unreal world whose calm can be preserved only by closing out anything that would disturb or threaten our confident and assured convictions. Even among those who profess to believe there is so much pretended belief, so much double-thinking, so much wishful thinking, that when we are asked to declare our faith we find it easier to state, not what we do believe, but what we should like to believe, or what the church believes, or what we think we are expected to believe. And somewhere in this process the sense of what it means to believe is lost. Unreality invades our worship and our life. We are one thing in church and something different at work; we believe among our believing friends and are skeptical among charming unbelievers. We hunt with the hounds and run with the hares and hold contradictory opinions with ease, allowing belief to remain vague enough to accommodate all points of view.

But not this man! He claims nothing he doesn't have. If he is divided, he says so. Much is unresolved, but he knows who he is and where he stands. He does not pretend to a perfect belief, and acknowledges that his unbelief is troubled. He has not lost himself. There is a directness and integrity about him that our Lord once described as purity of heart. I am tempted to say that he is a man of good manners.

In 1899 George Bernard Shaw wrote a letter to a newspaper criticizing a performance of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. Shaw was for years a music and drama critic, and his letter expressed his unhappiness at what had been done to the play. He wished he could praise the production, but could not, for "this is *As You Like It* as you don't like it," and if that seems impolite, then we should remember that it is not the business of the critic to be polite. Good manners in the critic consist in sincerity, not in smooth speech.

What are good manners before God? Surely they consist in sincerity. What delights God is not smooth words but truth in our inward parts. We cannot please God by pretending to be what we are not. Whom do we hope to deceive by our pretense? Not God, surely, for He reads our heart more truly than we do ourselves. Other people, then? But why should we wish to persuade others that we sincerely believe when our very profession of belief makes us false? Ourselves, then? Yes! It is ourselves we most wish to deceive. Indeed, we attempt to deceive others in the hope that they will help us to deceive ourselves by telling us what we have told them! We use them to make our self-deception plausible.

Again, not this man! There is openness and transparency in his, "I do have faith. Help me where faith falls short." Such unbelief is not culpable unbelief. To confess to God that with the best will in the world we simply cannot believe is to be

strengthened in our integrity. God will have truth in us before anything else. We cannot love God and not desire truth, for God is Truth. To love truth is one way to love God. It is the pure in heart who see Him, and purity of heart just means living in the truth.

That is why believers are at times something less than reverent. Their good manners consist, not in politeness but in sincerity. Someone once described a man as "reverent enough to be an unbeliever." The reverence of unbelievers is superficial, a mixture of superstition and fear. Believers are not reverent when they are struggling for faith. They argue and protest; they blaze with indignation against God, question His goodness, and dispute His wisdom, both in His ordering of the world and His treatment of them.

His servant Job did that. Job's comforters mouthed the easy platitudes of conventional religion, all the polite half-truths of smooth piety. But Job was fighting for his life and hurled his accusations of injustice against God with nothing held back. And in the end Job was vindicated and his profitless comforters condemned. It is Job who now speaks the strengthening word of faith to us and leads us to a deeper understanding of God's nature and ways. And so it is in this gospel story. All help for the man, and for us, begins in the honesty of our confession.

II. Notice, next, that the man not only declares the incompleteness of his faith but affirms the believing part of him.

Indeed, that is where he begins. He starts with the affirmation, "Lord, I believe."

Often, that is not where we begin. Indeed, our temptation is to pay more attention to the unbelieving part of us than to the believing part. I often think of this when I distinguish between atheists and agnostics. There is at least a theoretical difference between them. An atheist is a person who believes that God does not exist. An agnostic, however, is not nearly as definite as that. He declares that God may or may not exist; we do not know whether He exists or not.

Now this difference between atheists and agnostics is a valid and useful one when we wish to distinguish beliefs that differ. But in practice there is often no difference at all. The agnostic whose creed will not allow him to deny God's existence, will often deny it by his behavior. He may say he doesn't know if God exists, but will go to no trouble to find out. And in the meantime he acts as though God did not exist. The agnostic is often a practical atheist. That is why George Bernard Shaw once said that an agnostic is just an atheist who doesn't have the courage of his convictions.

The man who came to Jesus was not like that. He allowed the believing part of him some priority. He had what William James called "the will to believe." That is a good phrase. It does not mean that we should believe by an effort of will. No effort of will is needed to believe, for example, that two and two make four. We see the truth of it at once, and believe effortlessly. What William James meant by the will to believe is a willingness to allow the believing part of us its place, and a refusal to permit the unbelieving part of us to grab all our attention.

A Faith of Our Own

If we ask why we should do this, then the answer is clear: It is because belief makes everything possible. The closing out of the very possibility of faith leads nowhere. Faith and belief are prior as truth is prior to falsehood, as light is prior to darkness, as goodness is prior to evil, as trust is prior to suspicion. Hammarskjöld expresses this splendidly when he says, "Faith is, faith creates, faith carries. It is not derived from, nor created, nor carried by anything except its own reality."

We learn the truth of this from our daily experience. What should we think, for example, of a person who regards everyone with suspicion? Not, surely, that they are wise, and that their suspicion is to be commended, but that they are sick and that their suspicion is a sign of a disordered personality. We know that the natural and normal way to approach people is with openness and trust. We may sometimes discover that our trust is misplaced; but if we meet people with suspicion, no relationship will be possible. If you do not trust me you will never know me, for I will not show you anything I care about. We start with faith because faith itself is a way of knowing, while suspicion closes out the very possibility of knowledge. Unbelief never was a program.

Another reason why we should give the believing part of us a chance is that life goes on; we cannot remain suspended forever between belief and unbelief. The days come and go, presenting us with choices and demanding that we decide. We cannot for ever halt between two opinions. If there is a part of us that believes, we should take every opportunity to strengthen it. People sometimes say that they have doubts about faith. Yet they may seldom come to Church, or pursue any other means of resolving, them. If we are serious about our doubts, we should bring them to church. Dr. Fosdick tells of a man at the Riverside Church who in one sentence expressed both his doubts of faith and his desire to become a member of the Congregation. He wished to join the church because while he was not yet sure what he believed, he was quite sure that he should deal with his doubts inside the church, not outside it. Now that is giving faith a chance. That is what the man in the gospel story did when he came to Jesus saying, "Lord, I believe. Help mine unbelief."

David Roberts held the Marcellus Hartley chair of Philosophy of Religion at Union Theological Seminary here in New York until his untimely death. He met a man once who told him that for forty years he had tried to come to terms with his doubts. Then it dawned on him that instead of coming to terms with his doubts, he should try to come to terms with his faith. "Since then," he went on, "I have moved from the agony of questions I cannot answer to the agony of answers I cannot escape. And it is a great relief."

Or think of John Ruskin writing to his father to tell him that he would believe in Christ and take Him for his Master in whatever he did. He said that to disbelieve was as difficult as to believe, that there were mysteries either way, but that the best mystery was that which gave him Christ for a Saviour. When he had done this, he tells us, he felt a peace within which he had never known before.

A Faith of Our Own

The man who came to Jesus acknowledged both the measure of faith he had and where it fell short. But he began with, "Lord, I believe," allowing faith its proper place and bringing it to the One who both initiates and perfects it.

III. Notice, third, that he had the will to do, up to the point of believing.

His belief was not perfect. Nevertheless he was there, asking for help, exercising the measure of faith he had. He confessed that his faith fell short; but what he had was enough to bring him to Jesus in the hope that his son might be healed and his belief strengthened. Faith was not merely something he sought, but something he acted upon.

We should follow his example. Our temptation is to keep asking for more faith while failing to exercise the faith we already have. We are like the superficial person who is excited to learn of a newly-discovered work by Mozart, but who has never taken the trouble to listen to the long-discovered ones. Leslie Weatherhead once wrote a letter to his son, a Professor of English at one of our American universities, confessing that while he kept asking God for more knowledge, he often wondered if what he really needed was guts to do up to the point of knowing.

The same was true of Horace Bushnell. At the beginning of his teaching career at Yale, he found himself struggling for faith. He asked God for more light, thinking that what he needed was to see more clearly. Then he realized that there was little point in asking God for more light when he had not been true to the light God had already given him. Surely his first duty was to walk in the light he had already received. He knelt down and offered this prayer: "O God, I believe that there is an eternal difference between right and wrong, and I hereby give myself up to do the right and refrain from the wrong." That is where he started; and starting there, the Spirit of God, who is the Spirit of Truth, led him to a more perfect belief. He lived in Hartford, Connecticut, and one day was able to tell a friend, "I know Jesus Christ better than I know any man in Hartford."

What is keeping us from faith? Is it that we do not know enough? But we have not been faithful to such knowledge as we have! Is it more light that we need? But we have not walked in the light we have already received! It is sometimes an evasion to go on asking questions when we have not given ourselves to the answers we already know.

Here we must clarify the difference between an unbelief that is culpable and one that is not. For those who say that with the best will in the world they simply cannot believe, the New Testament has nothing but acceptance, encouragement and hope. The Apostle Paul urges us to work out our own salvation in the belief that it is God who is working in us. Not only is such unbelief not culpable; it is the very soul of integrity. Such unbelievers are not far from the Kingdom.

But there is another sort of unbelief which has no integrity in it. It acknowledges the force of truth, but does not do it; it sees the way clearly, but will not walk in it; it finds it easier to ask for more truth than to obey the truth already discerned. And such unbelief is culpable. To be guilty of it is to lose our integrity, our integration. It

A Faith of Our Own

is to be divided in ourselves; for to see clearly what we must do, and make no attempt to do it, is to lose ourselves. It is to be false to the best we know.

Those of us who long for a deeper faith must begin by discovering what it is we truly believe; not what we should like to believe, not what we think we are expected to believe, not what we pretend to believe, but what we really do believe. When we have found it, then we will have found our true selves. Such belief is just us; we couldn't get a razor blade between what we are and what we truly believe. And having found this steel-and-granite foundation upon which our character rests, we know what it is we have to build on.

We can start now. We know that love is better than hate; that courage is better than cowardice; that truth is better than falsehood; that honesty is better than deceit. We know that if we were to become Christians our lives would be elevated not brought low, enlarged not diminished. But if we are sure of these things, why have we not given ourselves to them? We go on asking for more light, or truth, or faith, when we have not acted on what we have already received and acknowledged. There is a sense in which we now have all the knowledge we need. What we lack is the strength and grace to do what we already know and have already seen. Listen to Drinkwater:

Knowledge we ask not-knowledge Thou hast lent,
But, Lord, the will,-there lies our bitter need,
Give us to build above the deep intent,
The deed, the deed.

You, too, have had your intimations, and have seen "visions too beautiful to be untrue." You have had your moments of clarity, and gained insights that have moved you by their loveliness. You have been hunted by truth and haunted by beauty. Conscience has rebuked you, and the Spirit has prompted you. Holding out against them has left you weary, empty and diminished. Yet in those moments when you gave yourself to the truth and beauty you perceived, you knew enormous bliss and the peace of integrity.

IV. That brings me to the fourth thing I want to say: Notice that the man knew where faith belonged.

He aimed it in the right direction. It was to Jesus that he said, "Lord, I believe. Help Thou mine unbelief." He knew that the proper object of faith is Christ.

We should learn from him that the best way to strengthen faith is not to scrutinize faith but to look at the person in whom we have faith. The only way you can learn to trust me more is to know me better; it will not help you much to sit and contemplate the nature of trust. The proper object of faith is not faith but the One on whom faith depends. The best way to strengthen belief is not to examine belief but to examine the evidence. C. S. Lewis tells us that as soon as he asks himself if he has faith he begins to lose it, for he is looking at faith instead of looking at Christ. Give God your attention and belief will be strengthened. Said W. B. Yeats, "All God asks is our attention."

A Faith of Our Own

It is a bit like trying to improve your vision by looking at your glasses. Don't look at them, look through them. It is not the study of belief that will deepen faith, but the vision of God. As Paul says in the Epistle to the Romans, "Faith is awakened by the message; and the message that awakens it comes through the word of Christ."

It is like falling in love. If you wish to discover whether or not you are in love, you will not do so by discussing the nature of affection but by getting to know your girlfriend or boyfriend better. I well remember a young couple who came to see me, greatly troubled because they couldn't decide whether or not they were in love. They had taken first-year psychology, you see, and thought they had to analyze everything. I asked them what they did when they spent an evening together, and they replied that they spent most of the time discussing whether or not they were in love. I ventured the opinion that that must make for a long evening. But they had come to the right person for help because I had taken second-year psychology. So I told them to stop scrutinizing their feelings, or lack of them, every time they were together. They should do interesting things, visit interesting places, discover common values and concerns. What kind of music did they like? Were they fond of the theater? Who were their favorite authors and composers? If they would get on with getting to know each other they would soon discover whether or not they were in love. They should give their attention, not to understanding the nature of love, but to understanding each other.

It is a bit like my asking, "Are you listening to me?" As soon as I ask, you stop listening while you decide whether or not you have been listening! When you are really listening you are not thinking about listening, you are thinking about what is being said! Similarly, as soon as I direct your attention to the order of worship you stop worshiping. You are no longer engaged in prayer or praise, you are engaged in thinking about prayer and praise.

It is like that with faith. I know a man who tells us that every morning we should stand in front of the mirror and say with increasing conviction, "I believe! I believe! I believe!" If I were to do that I'd feel very foolish indeed. I do not strengthen belief by saying "I believe!" but by getting to know, understand and love the One in whom I believe. I do not wish to strengthen my belief in belief nor my faith in faith. I want to strengthen my belief in God and my faith in Christ, so I look to them and find my faith increased. We used to sing:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.

The man who came to Jesus knew exactly what to do with whatever faith he had. He brought it to Jesus and found it multiplied.

V. That brings me to the last thing I want us to notice: The man who came to Jesus knew that to journey with Jesus is to have already arrived.

A Faith of Our Own

The truth is, you see, that none of us has perfect faith. Indeed, when we speak of perfect faith I am not sure that I know what we mean. Our faith is and always will be imperfect, incomplete. We do not even know how much faith we have. What we claim as great faith may be little more than the good feeling that comes from good health and favorable circumstances. We do not know how much illusion and self-deception there is in the faith we claim. When people tell me confidently that they have great faith it makes me uneasy. I confess I have little idea how much faith I have; I am not sure of either the amount of it or the quality of it. Has our "great" faith even been tested? Someone once said that we never know how deeply we believe something until it becomes a matter of life and death to us. Has our faith become a matter of life and death to us? If we were tortured, how much of our belief would we be willing to surrender before we reached that region where we located our true selves; and how much faith would be left then? The truth is that even our faith must be affirmed with penitence and wrapped round with the mercy of God. It is not only our unbelief that must be repented of, but our belief.

To have faith, then, is not merely to arrive at a destination, but to be on a journey. And it is the kind of journey in which we are always on the way, and have already arrived. One afternoon last week I went out with a friend in his car. We had somewhere to go, a destination to reach which promised a pleasant time when we got there. But having a place to go was only an excuse for going. Getting there was as much fun as arriving, for we had good conversation and much laughter on the way. It is like that when we are with someone we love. Our destination is already reached on the journey, for there is nothing we want more than the company of the person we are with.

It is like that with God. He who travels with God has already reached his destination. This does not mean that to travel hopefully is better than to arrive. It means that Heaven is our destination, and that the One who makes Heaven heavenly is our Companion on the way. We do not arrive at perfect faith at some moment at the end. Rather, we journey with One who every moment deepens our faith by His presence:

Thou art the Way.
Hads't Thou been nothing but the goal,
I cannot say
If Thou hadst ever met my soul.

The man said, "Lord, I believe. Help Thou mine unbelief." I suppose we could have uttered those words when we first issued from the Hands of God. And I expect that they will be our words when, at the last, we fall back into them. For what saves us is not our faith but the Hands that hold us, and the Love that will not allow us to slip out of them.