

FAITH

Faith is essential. It's a significant matter; a matter of ultimate consequence. In a variety of ways, this is what our appointed biblical texts have to say today.

Start with our reading from 1st Corinthians. It tells us that Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God for the people of God and that this power and wisdom beyond compare become ours through faith. If this weren't so, St. Paul wouldn't say today that those who believe the Church's proclamation about the crucified and risen Christ shall be saved. How's that for a witness to faith's significance! Faith in Christ shall be the difference between salvation and damnation; between eternal life and eternal torment. Our reading from John can be heard to say very similar things about faith.

In this reading, Christ executes judgment upon those who have turned Jerusalem's Temple into a marketplace. Might this give us a sneak preview of how Christ shall execute judgment when he returns to judge the living and the dead once and for all? Whether this was initially intended, I cannot say. But I certainly don't think it's a stretch to say that our reading from John provides us with a sense of how Christ shall administer judgment in the end. And what's the key or decisive variable going to be? It's going to be faith or the absence thereof.

Those who turn Jerusalem's Temple into a marketplace fail to believe that the Lord shall provide. Their faith is not in the Lord giving us our daily bread, but in their own ability to exploit religious pilgrims for personal gain. And this isn't the faith we're going to want in the end. As St. John says so famously in the verses that follow today's reading, it is those who have faith not in themselves, but in the Son who God gave for the sake of the world who shall not perish, but have eternal life. Could it be any clearer that faith is what I've called a matter of ultimate consequence? I don't think so. But even as the moneychangers practice the wrong kind of faith, they're still practicing faith. This reveals something important. Long before we get to the end when judgment shall be administered and salvation awarded to some, we're going to have faith of some kind. It may not be Christian faith, but it's going to be faith nonetheless. As life is presently constituted, there's no getting through it without faith of one kind or another.

This is because at present we live in a topsy-turvy world which comes with all kinds of uncertainty. As life is presently constituted, there's a lot that's up in the air, a lot that can fall in more than one way, and we understand it's in our interests to do all that we can to see that things do eventually land in the right place. The problem is there's no foolproof manual, no scientifically validated manual, on how to control or manipulate all the balls we have in the air. Often caught at a fork in the road, we have to turn and travel one way or another. We have to place a bet on whether right or left is best. And when you're placing bets in a game where the winner has yet to be declared you're practicing faith. Well before any winnings have been delivered, you've come to believe your bet is the best bet and this is faith through and through. Living in a conditional world and not having all the answers and abilities we need, we have to place bets and make educated guesses. And again, this is to have faith; even when it's not the faith we're going to want to have when Christ administers judgment in the end.

This brings us to our reading from Exodus. In a world where you can't get by without faith or some sort or another, God makes it very clear that the faith we have will have much to say not just about our ultimate future, but also about our here and now. Place the wrong bets, practice the wrong faith, bow down before the wrong god, this reading says, and you may very well screw things up so bad that it will take generations to undo the damage you've done. But practice the right faith, worship the right god, place the right bets, and you'll one day be able to

say that goodness and mercy have in fact followed after you all the days of your life. Though the emphasis is more upon our here and now than it is upon our ultimate future, this too reveals faith to be a matter of considerable consequence. It's all over the place in our readings today. You can't escape it. Faith is no laughing matter. Faith counts for much. Faith is a matter of present and future consequence. But with more than one faith presently available to us how do we place the right bet? Whether it be for salvation or for the best possible life until then how do we come to believe that the crucified and risen Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God for the people of God both now and later?

Well, if it's going to be up to us to make it happen ourselves, I'm afraid it's not going to happen at all. Any sermon that talks about choosing Jesus or claiming Jesus or deciding for Christ is a biblically uninformed sermon. We don't, and in fact, cannot choose faith in Christ Jesus. Faith in Christ Jesus chooses us through the Holy Spirit. It's why later in his first letter to the Corinthians St. Paul is going to write that no one can say Jesus is Lord apart from the Holy Spirit. It's the Holy Spirit who reveals to us that the crucified and risen Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God for the people of God. It's the Holy Spirit who convinces us that the Church and its proclamation are to be heard and heeded. Understood in this important and essential way Christian faith is not a choice, a bet, or an educated guess. It's a gift of the Holy Spirit. To practice the right faith, we need the Holy Spirit as much as we need air to breath. To be washed white in the blood of Lamb we need faith. This is sure. But it's just as sure that there shall be no Christian faith for us now or later apart from the Holy Spirit. And all that the Holy Spirit needs to get its faith-making and faith-sustaining work done is a little light. Thankfully, the other members of the Holy Trinity have seen to it that this needed light is not in short supply.

In today's reading from Exodus, we hear of how God once delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage; an experience that can remind us of how through Christ Jesus we have now ourselves been delivered from bondage to sin, death, and devil. This is a little light; the very thing the Holy Spirit needs to create and sustain faith. And what about our reading from 1st Corinthians' many references to how Christ went to the cross for you and me? This too is a little light; the very thing the Holy Spirit needs to create and sustain faith. Or what about our reading from John's references to Christ's resurrection from the dead after three days? With God's power and love able to defy death, with all things so clearly possible for God, why in the world wouldn't we want to be people of Christian faith? When the light of Christ's resurrection from the dead is on hand, it's an argument the Holy Spirit can and will make so we might enjoy the profound benefits of Christian faith both now and later. As was also the case with the light that shines forth from the cross and out of Israel's liberation from Egypt, we've got yet another example of how important it shall be for us to gather together so that a little light might shine forth from the word of God read, heard, seen, sung, swallowed, prayed, and preached in this place and others like it. Now as in the past, it's these gathering around the word of God in all of its varied forms which shall provide the light the Holy Spirit shall need to make and sustain Christian faith. And so, remembering just how consequential the gift of Christian faith is, where should we be as often as possible? In church, gathered with one another, and around the word of God in all of its visible and audible forms. May this ancient wisdom outlive all the ways in which the past year has interrupted and complicated our former life as people of Christian faith. Amen!