



The Holy Spirit Province

NEWSLETTER

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PERSONAL versus SECOND-HAND FAITH: 24TH SUNDAY B

Isaiah 50:5-9; James 2:14-18; Mk 8:27-35

There are two kinds of faith. The first is inherited faith. This is the faith that comes from our ancestors, our forefathers and foremothers. More immediately it is the faith practised and passed on by our parents. The second kind of faith is personal faith. It is the faith of those who, helped by the 'amazing grace' of God, believe through their own reasoning and reflection. There are gains and losses to be had with each kind.

Those who inherit their faith have the advantage that they are not easily tempted to doubt or denial. Even when confronted with attractive arguments against what they believe, their faith stays strong. This is because of their strong family traditions about it, and because it has never been part of them to analyse what they believe. But they also have a disadvantage. They have not thought enough about their faith. It is more a habit and a routine than a matter of personal conviction. So too they find it hard to put into words just what they believe. or to live what they believe. It's not yet a big enough part of who they are. Until it is, they may be more cultural than convinced Christians.

Those with a personal faith have this particular advantage. They have discovered God for themselves. They have reached their convictions with their minds. But they too have a disadvantage. What they believe can be shaken by arguments to the contrary, and when that happens, they may be tempted to ditch their faith, and even to toss it completely overboard. For them to keep on believing, their faith has to be grounded in something more than themselves and their thought processes.

The best kind of faith is a mixture of both inherited and personal faith. While affirming and valuing what has been passed down to them, such believers also count on their capacity to question the origin and meaning of what they believe, to think things out for themselves, and to conclude that their personal beliefs are solidly based, meaningful and helpful. For Sr Joan Chittister a particularly important question to ask and share today, is what she has labelled, 'women as ministers of grace, not just consumers.'

It's just not enough to say, 'My family has been Christian. My parents are believers.' Because an inherited faith is a second-hand faith! Every generation has to own and personalize the faith that has been passed on. It has been said that some churchgoers are little better than baptized pagans. That's unduly harsh. But just the same, we see some glum and tired, bored and indifferent faces in church, the faces of people, e.g., who come late and leave early. Words of the 19th-century philosopher Frederick Nietzsche come to mind in their regard: 'Christians should look more redeemed.'

It's important for us to come up with our own answers, and to be able to state our beliefs and values as Christians. It is not sufficient to repeat the official answers and state the official formulas, such as 'consubstantial with the Father.' For faith to be alive and influential in our lives, we have to make out of inherited faith, personal faith. What our family believes is not ours until we are walking the journey of faith ourselves, and 'walking the walk, not just talking the talk,' as the rappers put it. The more convinced believers we have in the Church, the more it is founded on rock, and not on sand.

The questions Jesus asked his apostles today are the most important in the whole gospel. First, he asks: 'Who do other people say I am?' The answers they give him were way off the mark. Then he turns to them and asks: 'And you, who do you say I am?' Peter speaks up for the group, 'You are the Christ.' He says, 'you are the Messiah, the Saviour'.

Peter got Jesus right. Jesus was, and still is, the Messiah. But he did not get Jesus fully and perfectly right. He did not know or accept that Jesus would be a suffering Messiah, and not a military and political leader. That was something he had to learn, and learn the hard way he did.

What Peter did get right were his words as far as they went. But when he came to acting on his faith, he failed. His lowest point was when he denied that he ever knew Jesus, or had anything to do with him. This shows that we need God's grace, not only to profess our faith in words, but also to live it, to practise it, and especially if or when we find ourselves under pressure. In fact, in asking us what do we think of him, Jesus also implies that additional question: 'So, what are you going to do about it?'

So, for the great grace of an active and practical faith, let us pray to the Lord, both for ourselves and one another!

May the passion of Jesus Christ, and his everlasting love, be always within our minds and hearts!

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