

10. A Believing Heart

Of necessity prayer is a faith-experience. This should not come as a surprise since belief plays a huge role not just in the religious dimension of our lives but in every other dimension as well. Let us delay on this point before examining the place of belief in our life of prayer. We begin by examining the way our intelligence works.

Because of the wonderful gift of intelligence, we are able to attend to whatever it is that we are experiencing, and in the same conscious act to attend to ourselves as the one having the experience. I experience myself as the experiencing subject in the very same act as I experience whatever it is that is the object of my experience. In the very same act of seeing you I experience myself as the one seeing. I can, of course, in a second act, reflect upon myself as the one who had the experience, in which case I become the object of this second act of reflection, as well as being its subject. The point that I am making here is crucial and basic. To ascertain its truth all that is necessary is that I attend carefully to what is going on in my conscious states. I will discover two poles. In the very same act of experiencing something I am conscious of myself having the experience. This is prior to any act of reflection, and it is this bipolar nature of consciousness that frees me from being trapped in a merely subjective world. I am able to distinguish between myself as the experiencing subject and the object that I am experiencing. I am able to ask questions of reality and I am able, to a limited degree, to discover answers. I can come to insight and understanding. Of course I can make mistakes, but if I am careful and reflective, and if I am humble enough to check my conclusions, I can make true, though partial, judgments about how things really *are*, and not just about how they *seem* to me to be.

It is obvious that this capacity to know is limited. One limitation is the impossibility of checking everything for ourselves. In fact, we base our acceptance of the truth of most things not on our own knowledge but on belief. We accept many things as true because we trust other people. We trust that the tape measure that we bought in the shop is accurate. When we are in a locality with which we are unfamiliar, we trust the road directory to guide us. This is a reasonable thing to do. After all, many people are using tape measures or street directories and there would soon be complaints if they were inaccurate. We know the length of an object and we know how to get to our destination, not because we have checked it out for ourselves, but because we believe those responsible for producing the tape measure or the directory. Examples could be multiplied. It would be very unintelligent of us to limit our knowledge to what we had worked out for ourselves. At the same time, it would be foolish to believe anything and everything without testing it. We must be prepared to adjust if we discover that those whom we trust happen to be wrong in some situations, just as we have to admit that we are mistaken in some of the things we were so sure we knew.

There are also aspects of reality that we could never fully work out however long and hard we tried. There are things that are simply beyond the capacity of any human mind to comprehend. It is surely obvious that there is a lot more to existence than we can establish by the use of limited human reasoning. To think that the only windows into reality are those that our intelligence can open would be to cut oneself off from much rich

human experience. It would be to act in a very unreasonable way. It is not that in such matters we believe without evidence. It is that the evidence upon which we base belief is not such as to convince reason alone. If we are to be open to reality, we must be prepared to go beyond the frontiers attainable by reason.

In accepting as true matters that are outside the realm of reason we are not devoid of criteria. One criterion concerns the source that we are invited to believe: we must have reasons for accepting the source as worthy of trust. A second criterion is that what I believe does not contradict what I know in other areas. A third criterion is the fruit that comes from believing. If believing makes a person more attentive to the data of experience, more thoughtful and reflective in seeking for truth; more humble in admitting prejudices and oversights, and more careful in checking judgments; if believing leads to behaviour that is reasonable and responsible, and to a life of greater love; then that is surely a good sign of the reasonableness and value of belief. This applies to a number of fields of human knowledge, including psychology. Included also is the realm of religious faith.

As regards the religious beliefs that are at the heart of the Christian tradition, our reliance is on Jesus himself and on the many wonderful human beings who have believed in him and whose lives have an excellence acknowledged by anyone who cares to investigate. Such faith goes beyond the realm of reason, but it is not without supporting evidence, and it plays an important role in many areas of human behaviour.

When John of the Cross speaks of faith, he goes beyond the arena of the human choice we make to believe. He speaks of a gift of God that brings darkness to the intellect so that we are able to choose God freely without the distracting intervention of the intellect. To truly welcome God's offer of communion is to let go my tendency to take a step only when it appears reasonable to my intellect. To believe is to choose to allow the light of my intellect to be rendered invisible by the stronger light of faith, much as the light from the stars cannot be distinguished in daylight. To believe is to walk by love, by God's love that we have chosen to allow into our minds and hearts. Love teaches us much that reason alone cannot teach. Belief opens the mind to a wealth of insights unattainable by reason alone. For this reason we would be wise to heed the words of Saint Augustine: 'Do not seek to understand that you may believe. Seek, rather, to believe so that you may understand'.

We do not leave our mind behind when we believe. Reason is there to check that while believing takes us beyond reason it does not contradict it. Some people read the stories of creation, sin and the flood – stories found in the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis – and believe that they are literal accounts of observable events. Reason, aware of the discoveries of science, should alert us to the fact that we are misreading the text, failing to recognize the literary form being used by the writer and so failing to grasp the point being made in the stories. However – and this is of crucial importance – when we believe, it is not reason that is our guide. God is guiding us and it is faith, our welcoming of God's love, which enables us to see and follow the light. When we accept to walk by faith, it can seem that we are walking in darkness. No light is coming from the intellect to which we are accustomed to look for light. John of the Cross speaks of this as a blessed darkness, for in it we become aware of our limitations. More importantly, the only way forward is a deepening of trust in God as we fix our eyes on Jesus, 'the way, the truth and

the life'(John 14:6). He is 'the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life'(John 8:12).

Belief : The Biblical Tradition

The notion of religious faith is a rich one in the biblical tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures and in the Greek New Testament. It encompasses the idea of accepting something as true on the word of another, but its main focus is on action, on being 'faithful'. To grasp this rich concept it is necessary to begin by putting to the side the ordinary connotations that we associate with the word 'belief'. We can reclaim them later within a richer context.

The Hebrew noun *'mnh* (Greek *pistis*), translated 'faith' or 'faithfulness', and the related adjective, translated by such terms as 'faithful', 'reliable' 'secure' 'real' or 'trustworthy', denote a quality which something has when it behaves reliably according to its nature. This is a characteristic that God has in its fullness. When we say that God is faithful ('full of faith'), we are saying that God always acts in accordance with who God is. Jesus revealed that God is love and so can be depended on to act lovingly. God has made promises and so can be depended upon absolutely to keep faith. God is trustworthy, so we can rely on God and find our security in God.

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness (Lamentations 3:22-23).

In so far as human beings share in this divine quality, they are trustworthy. We can rely on them to act in accordance with the way things really are.

The Hebrew verb *'mn* (Greek *pisteuō*) covers a range of meanings, all related to the concept of reality and security. It ranges from making things secure, to behaving in a way that others can trust, and is also used for trusting in the faithfulness of another. While it includes the idea of trust, its focus is on consistency with objective reality. In the biblical tradition, to have faith (to 'believe') is to be in touch with reality and to behave accordingly, so that others can rely upon us.

Sharing Jesus' faith

Jesus had perfect faith. He always acted towards God as Son, in perfect trust and obedience. In doing so he revealed who God is for us and how we are to respond to grace. He is our 'leader in faith' (Hebrews 12:2). We are called to share in the faith of Jesus. Paul speaks eloquently of this:

It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God loving me and giving himself for me (Galatians 2:20).

In the Greek the words 'the Son of God' are in the genitive case. This establishes the fact that Paul is speaking of 'faith' as related to 'the Son of God'. The relationship itself is not determined. It could include our 'faith in the Son of God' (which is how the words are often translated). The Greek, however, does not support our limiting the meaning to this. It seems to me more likely that Paul is speaking of the 'faith' that Jesus has as 'the Son of God'. It is this faith that he shares with us through the gift of his Spirit. Our faith is a sharing in Jesus' faith. This is part of what Paul means when he writes:

We are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it (Ephesians 2:10).

Jesus' faith in the God he called 'Abba' opened him up to the fullness of communion with God. He is God's perfect work of art. Sharing in Jesus' faith, we will be transformed, becoming beautiful with his beauty, living with him in God's embrace.

We have faith, we believe, when we act in accordance with who we are: creatures who are adopted as Jesus' brothers and sisters. Since God is love, the idea of having faith is well expressed in the word 'believe', derived as it is from the words 'be' and 'love'. To believe is to be in love, accepting that we are loved by God and loving God in return. To love God is to act faithfully in accordance with God's will. We are totally dependent upon God. To believe is to live faithfully in this dependence.

God who is trustworthy is revealing God's self to us, speaking to us and drawing us by grace into a love-communion with God. The rich biblical concept of faith includes listening to God in trust and surrendering to God's love. God is faithful. To believe is to accept what God says as true, and to act in accordance with God's will. This is why Saint Paul insists that the faith that he wishes for the Christians is one that finds expression in love (Galatians 5:6). To believe as a disciple of Jesus means to accept what Jesus says and reveals as true because we trust him. We know how he lived and we know how he gave his life in love. He deeply touched the lives of many of his contemporaries, and those who chose to believe in him found their lives powerfully transformed. They shared their faith with others, and the tradition of faith continues into our own day, transforming lives in love and bringing people to an extraordinary human maturity.

Christian faith

From our brief analysis of the biblical evidence it is clear that to believe in Jesus means to accept his word as true in such a way that we act accordingly. Belief is about decision. It is about choice and lifestyle. It is about trusting. It is also about being worthy of trust. Mary the mother of Jesus is offered to us as an example of someone who shared in an outstanding way in the faith of Jesus. We recall the words spoken by Elizabeth:

Blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled (Luke 1:45).

Her faith sustained her through the sufferings she endured. The Catholic Catechism invites us:

We must turn to the witnesses of faith ... to the Virgin Mary who, in her pilgrimage of faith walked into the night of faith in sharing the darkness of her son's suffering and death (n.165).

When Peter took fright at the waves and thought he was going to sink, Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him:

You of little faith, why did you doubt? (Matthew 14:31).

At the last supper Jesus says to Peter:

Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren (Luke 22:31-32).

Jesus is praying that Peter will hold on to his trust in him. He is also praying that Peter, though he will lose courage and fail the coming test, will remain faithful to what he has seen and heard, and that he will repent and return.

Speaking to his disciples just before his passion and death, Jesus declares that they will, in fact, lose faith. But he promises to remain faithful to them. He will go ahead of them and call them again:

You will all lose faith ... However, after my resurrection, I shall go before you into Galilee (Mark 14:27).

Paul writes:

If we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself (2Timothy 2:13).

A recurrent theme throughout the Old Testament writings is that of God's faithfulness and the response of faith which God calls for from us. Here we will be content with a powerful statement of faith which concludes the prophecy of Habakkuk:

Even though the fig tree does not blossom, and there is no fruit on the vine;
even though the yield of the olive fails, and the fields afford no food;
even though the sheep vanish from the fold, and the stalls stand empty of cattle -
yet I will rejoice in Yahweh, I will exult in God my Saviour.
Yahweh my Lord is my strength.
He makes my feet as light as a doe's; he sets my steps on the heights.

Faith and prayer

Prayer is an exercise of faith. It is reasonable to believe, but this belief is a commitment to allow God, in whom we place our trust, to take us beyond the realm of reason into the realm of love. This journey is essential because, as John of the Cross asserts:

However impressive may be one's knowledge and feeling for God, that knowledge or feeling will have no resemblance to God and will amount to very little (*Ascent* II.4.3).

God takes you by the hand and guides you in darkness, as though you were blind, along a way and to a place you know not. You would never have succeeded in reaching this place no matter how good your eyes or your feet (*Dark Night* II.16.7).

As in other areas that transcend reason, we take reason with us, not now as our guide, but as a protection against being deceived. However, as we have already noted – and this must be stressed – reason is incapable of lighting the way for us. Reason is still there, but it is like the stars in daylight. The one who lights up our way is God and God alone. To believe is to place our trust in God and to follow the promptings of God's Spirit. To look to reason for light is to look in vain. God is taking us beyond where reason's light is of any help.

Faith, as we have been insisting, is about reality. Reality may be paradoxical, but it cannot be contradictory. If we believe things or behave in ways that contradict reason, our reason is there to warn us that we have taken a wrong turn. However, reason is no longer capable of being our guide. We are in a realm of experience where we have to learn to let go the controls, including the control of reason. We are walking by faith, for, as John of the Cross assures us, it is only in faith that the soul can be united to God (*Ascent*, II. 8). God is leading us by grace. To believe is to open our hearts to God, to welcome the grace, and to follow the promptings of grace.

We are conscious of ourselves being moved and inspired, but we do not directly experience God as the one moving and inspiring us, nor do we directly experience the gift of faith that enables our assent. We are conscious of surrendering ourselves in love, but God is not an object of unmediated experience and so remains beyond the direct grasp of our human faculties. Faith enlightens, but it is a light that the intellect cannot receive. Our loving occurs in the darkness of faith. When we accept to be guided by faith, we are united to God and guided along the way inspired by God, though our intellect cannot see the path. The way of faith is the way of love.

One way in which God leads us is through the guidance given us by the saints who have experienced prayer and have shared their grace-filled reflections with us. We can be thankful that we have such people to guide us and to warn us of the hidden reefs and the deceptive currents that can take us away from the union with God that is the goal of prayer. We have been drawing heavily in these reflections on the wisdom of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, because we have the assurance of our faith community, the Church, that the teaching of these two saints is consistent with the essential traditions of Christianity.

In his masterful analysis of the teaching of Teresa, Father Marie-Eugène OCD speaks of the relationship between faith and prayer. We will conclude our study of this matter with this statement, which prepares us for Parts Two and Three of this book:

Since faith attains to God and since God, like a consuming fire, is always ready to communicate God's self, each act of faith accompanied by love puts us in contact with that burning fire, places us under the influence of its light and its flame. In other words, it procures for us an increase of grace and hence of participation in the divine nature. Whatever may be the circumstances that accompany the act of faith – dryness or enthusiasm, joy or suffering – it attains to the divine Reality, and even if we experience nothing of this contact, we know it has existed and has born fruit ...

If, during dryness and powerlessness, we persevere in making acts of faith and of love, we can be assured that our prayer is good, even if we do not experience the effects of it ...

Mental prayer, attaining to God only by faith, will take its own perfection from the quality of the faith from which it springs. Hence we shall find in the development of the life of prayer two phases parallel to the development of the virtue of faith. The first phase, or active prayer, corresponds to that faith which draws light from reason; the second, or passive prayer, is nourished by the living faith that is perfected by the gifts of the Holy Spirit ...

In active prayer the soul draws from time to time from the divine fountains. In passive prayer, it remains bathed in the purifying waters and flames of the Holy Spirit where it is transformed from brightness to brightness until it resembles the Divine ...

One might ask if the desire for a deeper and more rapid transformation of love warrants an effort on the soul's part to rise to passive prayer. It would be sufficient, so it seems, to stop the activity of the faculties after an act of faith, in order to prevent a return to the natural acts and to keep the soul in the obscure reality to which it has just attained. Saint Teresa has treated at some length of the attempt (*Interior Castle* IV.3), and declares that it proceeds from presumptuous pride and that it would be useless ...

We are to resort to the modest forms of active prayer and continue thus in patient and peaceful labour until God lifts us up into passive prayer ...

It is good to desire higher and quicker means of arriving at perfect union, but always while guarding against any presumptuous effort to procure them on one's own ...

The contemplative in contemplation will have to prefer darkness to all distinct lights – whether these lights come from the formulas of dogma or even from God – in order that, through it, one may remain in contact with the Divine. One will have to watch not to allow oneself to be drawn away by the disquiet of the lower faculties, not even to put them at peace; nor to let oneself be wrapped up by the sweetness that comes from God, nor to follow after the delight of it in the senses. No matter what happens the contemplative must lift up the antennae of faith above all perceptions and unrest and turn back to the serene and peaceful darkness in which the Infinite is revealing and giving God's self ...

Faith being the only proximate and proportionate means for attaining to God in our progress towards divine union, we must not prefer any natural light to it, nor any supernatural gift however elevated in may be. This utter detachment from all created goods constitutes the whole of contemplative asceticism. Thus faith and hope are purified, and perfect union with God is realised according to the measure of our grace (*I want to see God*, pages 543-548).