

## Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost 2019

Last week we considered the issue of faith and we were presented with something of a homiletic tour de force by Canon Scott. His thinking was based on the poem 'The wreck of the Deutschland' by Gerald Manley Hopkins. It is not an easy poem but one that requires time and patience and is therefore, in itself, a little like the life of faith. It deals with a shipwreck and the question of faith in the midst of fear, of pain, suffering, in the midst of death. Amongst the ship's passengers are five nuns banished from Prussia, at the height of the storm the 'tall nun' calls out 'O Christ, Christ come quickly.' Hers however was not faith in a Christ as some kind of divine coastguard or surf lifesaver, her faith was in the faith of Christ who had gone before her and who knew her fear and pain.

Faith it seems is the issue that troubles and perplexes us most in our spiritual lives. Sometimes we think we have none, sometimes we wonder if others have more than us. Like the disciples we might be tempted to pray 'Lord, increase our faith' as if it's something doled out by the spoonful or echo the words of the man with the sick child in his desperation: 'Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.' Last week Jesus told us that even faith the size of a mustard seed would achieve great things. Even faith of that magnitude clearly seems well beyond the majority us.

I have no glib response, there is no short answer! But let's consider some things that might help us. The first is the problem of personal faith. Our world would have us keep matters of religion strictly personal, and we tend to think of faith in this way but it is not. Whatever personal faith we manage to hold onto will always be battered and bruised by the world around us, by disappointments, by grief and by our own doubts and failings. What is important is not just personal faith but the faith of Christ. Our faith is nested within the faith of Christ whose body we are. Rather than worrying about our faith or lack thereof we are called to give thanks for the faith of Christ and our place within his body.

Whilst contemplating today's readings I was drawn again to the life of a Belgian Priest called Jozef De Veuster. In 1864 Jozef found himself working among the indigenous folk of the Hawaiian Islands. It sounds like a dream posting! But this was before board shorts, surfing and Hawaii 5-0! The bishop sought volunteers from among his clergy to work on a Leper colony that had been established on one of the more remote islands and on May 10 1873 Jozef, the first volunteer who had taken the name Father Damien, arrived at the isolated settlement where 816 lepers lived. On his arrival he spoke to the assembled lepers as 'one who will be a father to you, and who loves you so much that he does not hesitate to become one of you; to live and die with you.' Damien worked with them to build a church and establish the Parish of

Saint Philomena. In addition to serving as a priest, he dressed residents' ulcers, built a reservoir, built homes and furniture, made coffins, and dug graves. Six months after his arrival, he wrote to his brother, in Europe: "...I make myself a leper with the lepers to gain all to Jesus Christ." Damien died of leprosy at on 15 April 1889, aged 49.

When Jesus reaches out to those in need to the outcast, the diseased, the other he becomes one of them. In the act of healing the Lepers, Jesus has given something of himself to them and because of his faith he becomes one of them. It is the Samaritan who realises this and returns to give thanks. All of his companions experienced healing, but only the real outsider, the Samaritan realised the nature of the gift and returned to give thanks.

Paradoxically, when we concern ourselves with our personal faith, we are close to thinking of ourselves as self-sufficient. But we are not. When we worry ourselves silly over the matter of personal faith we are not far from saying that our salvation, our health well-being lies simply within our own grasp, in our ability to have faith. And from there it is a small step to look at others and compare ourselves with them and this does us no good. John Henry Newman, whose canonization is being celebrated today in Rome and England preached this in one of his so called 'Parochial and Plain sermons':

We are not our own, any more than what we possess is our own. We did not make ourselves; we cannot be supreme over ourselves. We are God's property by creation, by redemption, by regeneration. Is it not our happiness thus to view the matter? Is it any happiness, or any comfort, to consider that we *are* our own? It may be thought so by the young and prosperous. These may think it a great thing to have everything, as they suppose, their own way,—to depend on no one,—to have to think of nothing out of sight,—to be without the irksomeness of continual acknowledgment, continual prayer, continual reference of what they do to the will of another. But as time goes on, they will find that independence was not made for man—that it is an unnatural state—may do for a while, but will not carry us on safely to the end. No, we are creatures; and, as being such, we have two duties, to be resigned and to be thankful.

Dare I say that it is not all about our faith in Christ, but *his* faith in us, *his* faith gifted to us; to which we respond in thankfulness. I sense this in Paul as he writes to his young protégé Timothy, hence those words important to us too... if we are faithless, he remains faithful — for he cannot deny himself. Amen.