

23. Contemplation and Faith

Since beginning our reflections on contemplative prayer, we have had occasion a number of times to stress the importance of faith. Before pursuing the relationship between faith and contemplation, we will do two things: we will look briefly at the important role played by faith in everyday life in our acquisition of knowledge; and we will look at the biblical understanding of religious faith.

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 be conscious of ourselves as the one having the experience. We are able to explore the meaning of what is happening to us, and come to insight and understanding. In other words, we are capable of knowing reality. Of course we can make mistakes, but if we are careful and reflective, and if we are humble enough to check our conclusions, we can make true, though partial, judgments about the way things really *are*, and not just about the way they *seem* to us 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 the directory, and there would soon be complaints if there were errors in it. We know how to get to our destination, not because we have checked it out for ourselves, but because we believe that those responsible for the directory know what they are doing. Examples could be multiplied. It would be very unintelligent of us to limit our knowledge to what we have worked out and checked for ourselves. Of course 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 areas that, even if we had all the time in the world, we could never work out: they are simply beyond the capacity of any human mind to discover. 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 ourselves 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. Yet even here reason continues to play an important role. If we are tempted to believe something that contradicts reason, we must not allow ourselves to be deceived. Reason must be respected within its own realm. Truth can be beyond the realm established by reason, but it cannot contradict it.

In accepting as true matters that are outside the realm controlled by reason we are not devoid of criteria. One criterion concerns the source that we trust: we must have reasons for accepting the source as worthy of trust in general and in the precise area which we are accepting as true on his or her word. A second criterion is that what I am believing does not contradict what I know in other areas. A third criterion is the fruit that comes from believing. If believing makes me more attentive to the data of my experience, more thoughtful and reflective in my seeking for truth, more humble in admitting my prejudices and oversights, and more careful in checking my judgments; if it leads to these and other wonderful human qualities, to goodness, even heroic goodness, 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 our 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.

Belief, then, plays an important role in many areas of human understanding. When we turn our attention to religious faith, we can learn a lot from an analysis of the biblical tradition. 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', refer to a quality which a person or thing has when it behaves reliably according to its nature. This is a characteristic that God has in its fullness: God is faithful, that is to say, God always acts in accordance with who God is. Thanks to Jesus we know 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, God's mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness' (Lamentations 3:22-23).

'You have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God' (Psalm 31:5).

When people are said to have this quality, a claim is being made that they are trustworthy. We can trust them, we can rely on them, because what they say and do is in accordance with the way things really are. To possess this quality called 'faith' (to be 'faithful'), we must seek the truth (Jeremiah 5:1, 3), we must deal honestly and carry out our obligations (2 Chronicles 31:12-18; 34:12; Proverbs 3:3). Then we share in the faithfulness of God, and we can be relied upon (Jeremiah 15:18). The Hebrew verb *'mn* (Greek *pisteuein*) covers a range of meanings, all related to the concept of reality and security. It includes making things secure, behaving in a way that others can be secure in relying upon us, and also trusting in the faithfulness of another.

Jesus had faith in its human perfection. 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). Paul speaks eloquently of his sharing in Jesus' faith:

'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).

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 God 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, children with him of God. 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 choose to place ourselves in God's 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).

Similarly, James insists that real faith will always show itself in the way we act:

‘What good is it if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead’ (James 2:14-17).

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.

From our brief analysis of the biblical evidence it is clear that to believe in Jesus means to choose 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. The Catholic Catechism (n. 165) presents Mary the mother of Jesus as an example of someone who shared in an outstanding way in the faith of Jesus:

‘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.’

We recall the words spoken by Elizabeth about Mary:

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

Jesus reproached Peter for failing to trust him 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 Jesus. 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, will repent and return.

In a letter from Rome when his own life was about to be taken from him, Peter wrote:

‘It is through Jesus that you have come to place your trust in God, for it was God who raised Jesus from the dead and gave him glory. So now your faith and your hope are set on God’ (1 Peter 1:21).

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 will go before you into Galilee’
(Mark 14:27).

Paul writes:

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

Many of the Old Testament writings are about God's faithfulness and the response of faith that God inspires in us. Here we will be content with one fine statement of faith that 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 GOD, I will exult in God my Saviour.
GOD my Lord is my strength, who makes my feet as light as a doe's,
and sets my steps on the heights' (Habakkuk 3:17-19).

Finally, before reflecting on the relationship between faith and contemplation, let us listen to two poems by the Australian lyric poet, James McAuley. The first is entitled *In a Late Hour*: It stresses reliance on God when everything else is failing. It stresses also the love element in belief.

'Though all men should desert you my faith shall not grow less,
but keep that single virtue of simple thankfulness.
Pursuit had closed around me, terrors had pressed me low;
you sought me and you found me, and I will not let you go.
The hearts of men grow colder, the final things draw near.
Forms vanish, kingdoms molder, the antirealm is here
whose order is derangement: close-driven, yet alone,
men reach the last estrangement, the sense of nature gone.
Though the stars run distracted, and from wounds deep rancours flow,
while the mystery is enacted I will not let you go.'

The second was written a few months before his death:

'I know that faith is like a root
That's tough, inert and old;
Yet it can send up its green shoot
And flower against the cold.

I know there is a grace that flows
When all the springs run dry.
It wells up to renew the rose
And lift the cedars high.'

In contemplative prayer we experience what happens when we open our hearts to God. Previously we were guided by our reason as we responded to grace. Now we are taken beyond the arena in which reason is capable of being our guide. As in other areas that transcend reason, we take reason with us, not as our guide, but as a protection against being deceived. 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 let go the controls, including the control of reason. We are walking by faith alone, for, as John of the Cross assures us, it is only in faith that we can be united to God (*Ascent*, II. 8). We are yielding to God's grace drawing us into communion.

We are assisted by the saints who have experienced contemplative prayer and have shared their grace-filled reflections with us. We can be thankful that we have such people as John of the Cross and Teresa to guide us and warn us of the hidden reefs and the deceptive currents that can take us away from the union with God which is the goal of prayer. 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. Many holy people have acknowledged how much they owe to the

teaching of these two great teachers of contemplative prayer. We have been drawing heavily upon their wisdom in our reflections.

It is faith that guides us at every stage of our inner journey. In the early part of our prayer journey we are assisted by our imagination, memory and our ability to reason. When we open our minds and hearts to contemplation, these necessarily fail us and we must learn to walk by pure faith. We are conscious of ourselves being moved and inspired, but we do not directly experience God as the one moving and inspiring us. We are conscious of surrendering ourselves in love, but God remains beyond the direct grasp of our human faculties. Our loving occurs in the 'darkness' of faith.

John of the Cross prays:

'May my eyes behold you, because you are their light, and I would open them to you alone. Reveal your presence, and may the vision of your beauty be my death. For the sickness of love is not cured except by your very presence and image. O spring, like crystal! If only, on your silvered-over face, you would suddenly form the eyes I have desired, which I bear sketched deep within my heart' (*The Spiritual Canticle*, Stanzas 10-12).

To grasp the importance of faith in contemplative prayer, let us listen again to Marie-Eugène (*I want to see God*, pages 543-549):

'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 its effects.

'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 will 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.

'Conceptual faith attains to divine Reality, but reverts to the exercise of the imagination, memory, understanding and will, to find in them its light and food. The prayer that corresponds to it will truly be a friendly converse with God, but one that is sustained by the activity of the imagination, of the intellect, or of the will. The activity of these faculties is predominant; hence the name of active prayer ... Perfect faith on the other hand receives from God, through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, its light and its measure. In the state of prayer animated by it, we are drawn towards the divine Reality by the obscure perception of it that we receive through the gifts, and we are, at it were, raised above our own natural manner of activity; or at least we continually tend towards the divine Reality revealing itself. This is called contemplative or passive prayer, because the action of God predominates ... In contemplative prayer, since faith finds its food in God, our duty is to calm the activity of the natural faculties, and, by very simple acts, to sustain the attraction that the divine Reality exercises over us. The operation of the gifts requires a silent peaceful attitude; and the respect due to the divine working, now predominant in us, demands a continued orientation towards the divine.

‘In active prayer we draw from time to time from the divine fountains. In passive prayer, we remain bathed in the purifying waters and flames of the Holy Spirit where we are transformed from brightness to brightness until we resemble the Divine.

‘One might ask if the desire for a deeper and more rapid transformation of love warrants an effort on our 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 stay in the obscure reality to which we have just attained. Saint Teresa has treated at some length of the attempt (IV Mansions, 3), and declares that it proceeds from presumptuous pride and that it would be useless ... Humility alone can claim to draw down these divine gifts ... 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. We will have to watch not to allow ourselves 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 very 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 grace.

‘Distinct knowledge or delights received in prayer are a precious means for going to God, and we may use them with gratitude and humility; but attachment to them can change them into dangerous obstacles. Furthermore they are not necessary for arriving at perfection or even at perfect contemplation ... The state of perfection normally involves a darkness pervading our whole being, which, purified and made amenable to the Divine, finds in it a delightful food. The divine transcendence is better known and hence more obscure than ever, but in that deeper obscurity we glimpse the light of dawn as we tend towards the divine Reality that is penetrating us and to whom we long to surrender ourselves more and more.’

Let us conclude with the dying prayer of Yogananda. Addressing the Risen Christ he prayed:

‘In your temple, by your own hand, light the lamp of your love.

Turn my darkness into light. Turn my darkness into light.’