

## ADVENT 2 – FAITH – SERMON (05.12.2021)

*May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Good morning, everyone!

When you looked at the front of today's service sheet, did you think, "Oh oh! Oops! Someone made some typos in the title for the service."? *Fides quae creditur* with an 'e', which is then repeated *fides qua creditur* without an 'e'. Let me reassure you that both lines should be there, the first time with an 'e' and the second time without an 'e'. And let me take the time of this sermon to explain to you why.

At every Sunday service, we stand up to declare the words of either the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed, which begin with the statement, "I believe in God." But what does it mean when we speak about "believing in God"? What are we to understand by words such as "belief" and "faith"?

Well, to begin with, we need to note a distinction between two meanings of the word "faith." There is faith understood as a set of beliefs, and faith understood as an act of believing. Hence the two lines of the title for this service and sermon.

The Latin expression *Fides quae creditur* with an 'e' refers to an objective set of beliefs such as those declared in the creeds, in other words, "the faith that one believes". The creeds are understood to provide an outline of the basic beliefs of the Christian faith.

And *fides qua creditur* without an ‘e’ refers to a subjective act of trust or assent, by which individual believers accept the basic ideas of the Christian faith, in other words, “the faith by which one believes”.

The biblical sense of the word “faith” includes the idea of trusting God, and this stands at the center of the Old Testament story of the calling of Abraham, which is mentioned in today’s reading from the book of Hebrews. The narrative tells us of how God promised to give Abraham countless descendants, as numerous as the stars of the night sky. Abraham believed God – that is, he trusted the promise that was made to him. Abraham did not merely accept that a God existed; he trusted this God.

The intellectual exploration of the consequences of trust in God is often expressed in the slogan “faith seeking understanding.” This is about earnestly wanting to understand what it is that we believe in. Christian faith sets in motion a quest to know and understand God, and what we believe about him.

The Bible promotes the idea of faith seeking understanding. Jesus taught that the greatest commandment instructs us to love the Lord with all our heart, soul and mind (Matthew 22:37). And speaking to the disciples who were on the road to Emmaus, Jesus “opened their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45). The apostle John taught that faith is accompanied by an understanding of God. He wrote, “We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding” (1 John 5:20).

So, the motto of “faith seeking understanding” is not about replacing faith with understanding, but supplementing faith with understanding. It’s a natural progression from trusting God to understanding God.

Now, is faith simply an act of human trust? Or is God somehow involved in this process? Both Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions insist that there is an interplay of the human and divine in faith and salvation. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says this:

*Believing is possible only by grace and the interior help of the Holy Spirit. But it is no less true that believing is an authentically human act. Trusting in God and cleaving to the truths he has revealed is contrary neither to human freedom nor to human reason.*

And the Protestant reformer, John Calvin wrote something similar. He emphasized both the importance of faith as a trusting response to God’s promises, and the role of the Holy Spirit in enabling this human response. Calvin said:

*Now we shall have a right definition of faith if we say that it is a steady and certain knowledge of the divine benevolence towards us, which is founded upon the truth of the gracious promise of God in Christ and is both revealed to our minds and sealed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.*

Okay, next question then, how does faith relate to reason? Human beings long to know what is truth and want to find answers to questions like “Why are we here? What is the meaning of life?” But unaided human reason cannot fully penetrate to the mystery of life. And so God graciously chose to make these things known through revelation. Otherwise, they would remain unknown.

Faith is not blind trust. It is not opposed to the evidence of the world. Rather, it points out that the world, which Christians see as God’s creation, that this world is permeated with hints of God’s existence and nature. It is reasonable to infer the existence of God from the wonders of nature and from within us a human sense of the divine. Although these hints do not count as “proofs”, they can, however, be interpreted as confirmation or corroboration of the basic themes of faith.

There is a huge difference between faith and credulity. To be credulous is to believe something for no sound reason. It is the stuff that superstition is made of and thrives on. But faith is established on coherent and consistent reasoning and upon sound empirical evidence. The apostle Peter wrote, “For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Peter 1:16).

Christianity does not rest upon myths and fables but on the testimony of those who saw with their eyes and heard with their ears. The truth of the gospel is based on historical events as demonstrated by the details given in today's reading from Luke 3 that historically dates the ministry of John the Baptist. If the account of these historical events is not trustworthy, then our faith would be in vain. But praise be to God, the four gospels provide us eyewitness accounts that were orally communicated until they were written down. God does not ask us to believe anything on the basis of myth.

Today's theme of "faith" follows on from the theme of "hope" from last Sunday. The first verse of today's passage from the book of Hebrews associates faith with hope. The verse says "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). Faith includes the essence of our hope for the future. We trust God for the future based on our faith in what he has accomplished in the past. To believe that God will continue to be trustworthy is not a gratuitous faith. There is every reason to believe that God will be as faithful to his promises in the future as he has been in the past.

There is reason, a substantive reason, for the hope that is within us. And every year, during Advent season, we remember and look forward to celebrating the first advent, or first coming of Jesus into our world as a baby, to live as a man and die for us. And Jesus' second advent will happen in the future when he comes back as King and Judge, not as a baby. But we could say that there is another advent that happens in between the first and second comings – it is the coming of Jesus into our lives now.

*Fides quae creditur* with an 'e', and *fides qua creditur* without an 'e'. An objective set of beliefs partnered with a subjective act of trust in these beliefs. Or we could use the modern terms of head faith and heart faith. We need them both, so that head and heart, mind and emotions are vitally connected with one another, enriching and helping each other.

The Christian life can be a journey of discovery, of faith seeking understanding. It is challenging, even difficult to love what one does not understand, but through prayer, study, worship, discussion and fellowship, we can each find that the more we seek to understand God, the more we believe in him and the more we are drawn to love Him, which in turn draws us to understand him even more deeply.

Your mind and your intellect are great gifts. I urge you to think as searchingly as you can, ask all your questions, voice your doubts and ransack the world for knowledge. And I urge you to open your hearts to respond in love to the loving One whom you are coming to understand more and more with the passage of time.

The candles that we light during the four weeks of Advent remind us we can find hope, faith, joy and peace in the one whom John the Baptist pointed to, Jesus Christ who is the salvation of God, who is Emmanuel, God with us.