

I BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST

by JOHN H. WRIGHT

FAITH is man's response to God's saving revelation of himself. This revelation was communicated gradually over many centuries, calling for a successively deeper and more perfect response on man's part. Finally it reached its fulness in the revelation of Jesus Christ; and man's most perfect faith is contained in the profession, 'I believe in Jesus Christ'.

The Inner Beauty of this Faith

In the centuries of preparation before the coming of Christ, God revealed himself to Abraham, Moses, and the prophets, and through them to his chosen people. But all these bearers of the word of God were themselves only believers, perceiving in a partial and obscure manner the saving truth of God and bearing witness to it in their words and works. Christ came as the realization of all they had hoped for. He spoke, not as one who believes the truth of God, but as one who is this very truth. The eternal Son of God, the Word of the Father spoken in the depths of eternity and possessing all the radiant splendour of the divine nature, entered this universe of creatures as a man. He was the Light of the World, shining in the darkness of man's sin and ignorance, and drawing his power to illuminate, not by reflection from some source outside himself, but from the luminous reality of his own divine nature. 'In many various and diverse ways God spoke of old to the fathers through the prophets. But at last in these days, he has spoken to us through his Son, whom he made the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the splendour of his glory and bears the stamp of his very nature'.¹

Through faith in Jesus Christ we adhere to the truth of God made visible in human form. Only the intuitive vision of God in himself can surpass the excellence of this faith, for only the unveiled beauty of the face of God can be a greater divine self-revelation than that made through Jesus Christ, the Son of God become man.

Faith in Christ is not, however, simply a static admission of divinity and humanity joined in the unity of a single divine Person. That could be just the acceptance of another fact without any element of

¹ Heb 1, 1-2.

personal involvement. Again and again our Lord sought to arouse faith in himself as one sent by the Father for the salvation of men.¹ Faith is at once an acknowledgement of one's need for salvation and an acceptance of Christ as Saviour, as the source of the ultimate well-being and deliverance from evil that only God can give. The believer recognizes himself as the object of a divine mission of mercy and redemption; hence his faith in Christ involves him personally at the deepest level of his being.

By faith in Christ we accept God's gift to us and at the same time surrender ourselves wholly to him. For God wishes through Christ to be our salvation, our life, our eternal destiny. And by accepting this divine communication, we submit ourselves wholly to his saving truth and orientate ourselves to a goal within God utterly inaccessible to merely human endeavour. We place the whole meaning and hope of our existence in Christ's power and wisdom and love.

Faith in Christ is thus worlds removed from certain caricatures or pretended descriptions of it. It is not a resolution to think and act 'as if' certain things were so, a decision to live in a world of fantasy as being more congenial than the real world. Faith is the acceptance of divine realities communicated to us by God. Neither is faith a childish refusal to live with risk and uncertainty, a projection of our need for security into the unfriendly environment of an indifferent universe. It is a free and intelligent response to God's saving action made known to us in and through history. Nor is faith simply a leap in the dark, a groundless commitment of ourselves to an imagined word echoing in our consciousness. It is an opening of our minds to the light of God, abundantly witnessed to by his works and the testimony of his Spirit. And finally, faith is not just regarding God as a new source of useful information, much as one might learn the time of day from a casual passer-by-or even from a most reliable astronomical observatory. Revelation does not give us simply a new list of propositions guaranteed true by the authority of God, but introduces us into the mystery of God's saving love. Hence the acceptance of this revelation is not just an intellectual assent, but the 'total service of our mind and will'.²

The Gift of Faith

Although faith in Christ is man's response to God, man by himself is not the adequate source of this response. First of all, man needs,

¹ Cf Jn 5, 38; 6, 29; 17, 21 etc.

² Vatican Council I, Sess. iii, cap 3.

even before faith, certain assurances that only God can give. He depends upon them for moving toward faith. In order that faith be in keeping with man's nature as a reasoning being, he must have external and verifiable evidence of the fact that God has indeed revealed himself in Christ. He cannot respond to an invitation of which he is ignorant or doubtful. The earliest proclamation of the good news we have, that given by Peter on the day of Pentecost, points to the miracles and wonders that God worked through Christ as clear testimony to his divine mission.¹ But more important, the very act of faith itself is God's gift. For since faith means the directing of oneself to a destiny beyond one's own powers of achievement, beyond every goal naturally discoverable by man, it is only by the attraction and illumination of God that one can thus surrender oneself to him.

While faith is itself God's gift to us, it lies within the power of human nature to refuse this gift. But what would lead a man to withhold his acceptance from God's saving revelation of himself? This question has significance even for those who have grown up in the faith from their earliest years. For the causes that lead some men to refuse to believe can lead others to be half-hearted in their life of faith and, even, in some instances to abandon it altogether. Basically, the unwillingness to believe springs from some unwillingness to accept the consequences of God's transforming love manifested to us in Christ. To believe is to sacrifice radical independence. It is an admission of basic inadequacy. It means acknowledging that I do not hold my destiny in my own hands and that only through loving submission to one who is my Lord can my life have any real worth and meaning. For one who experiences the thrill of intellectual discovery and the success of persevering personal effort, it can seem demeaning and discouraging to admit that all this in the face of life's deepest purpose is by itself essentially useless. Complete self-reliance leads to complete failure. Man certainly is called upon to exert himself to the utmost in pursuing the goal of life, but he must dedicate all these exertions to implement a purpose that lies beyond his own knowledge and power. That this means an ennobling, even a divinizing, of human activity can be missed entirely by one who confuses achievement with personal self-sufficiency and independence.

This attitude of mind manifests itself in one special form: scandal at the lowliness and suffering of Christ. In his own day the citizens

¹ Acts 2, 22.

of Nazareth asked, 'Is not this the Carpenter'?¹ and they would not believe. As he hung dying on the cross, his enemies taunted him, 'If you are the Christ, come down from the cross, and we will believe'.² And ever since that day men who wished to do so have found in the abasement of the Son of God some reason for not accepting God on his terms. But there are no other terms on which we can accept God than his terms.

The Fruit of Faith

Faith, then, brings about a total transformation of human life. It is the beginning of God's great work in us, the foundation of all else that he accomplishes in our relationship to him. As St Paul clearly teaches, faith in Jesus Christ opens us to the realization of God's promises, to the fulfillment of his loving purposes.³ Faith is the subjective condition required in us that the great mystery of Christ become operative within us, that his life, death, and resurrection produce within us their effect of conforming us to him.

In describing these effects of faith we have always in mind what theologians call a 'living faith', and what St Paul calls a faith that operates through love.⁴ Faith of its very nature tends towards hope and love. It leads by its own inner dynamism to a complete trust in God and to the fulfillment of the command to love God above all things and others as Christ has loved us. Faith without hope and love is in an unnatural condition, like a plant without leaves and fruit. It must have these consequences that flow from it naturally, or it will soon die utterly.

The Immediate Effects

Scripture sums up the most immediate effect of faith in saying that it justifies a man,⁵ that is, it makes him right in his relationship to God. Just as sin is man's refusal to allow his life to be regulated by the goals established by God, faith is the whole-hearted acceptance of those goals. Consequently, through faith in Christ God's grace forgives us our sins and makes us just in God's sight. This explains why faith in the resurrection of Christ from the dead has from the beginning been the radiant centre of all else that we believe about him. As St Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans: 'What does (Scripture) say? The word is near you, in your mouth and in your

¹ Mk 6, 3.

⁴ Gal 5, 6.

² Cf Mk 15, 32.

⁵ Cf Rom 3, 28.

³ Cf Gal 3, 22.

heart. This is the word of faith which we proclaim. Because if you confess with your mouth, Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For by the heart one believes for justification and by the mouth one confesses for salvation'.¹ Christ's resurrection, with its accompanying exaltation to the right hand of the Father as Lord, is his complete victory over sin. For thereby as our Head he transported the human nature he shares with us from the weakened condition resulting from man's sin to the glory of eternal life, to the actual full achievement of man's destiny in God. By faith we share in his triumph. It becomes ours. Hence the direction of our life is changed from one which leads away from God under the dominion of sin, to one that moves toward him under the power of the risen Christ. The whole of Christ's life from the moment of the incarnation, when he announced to his Father, 'Behold I come to do thy will',² until his triumphant exaltation in glory is a single, undeviating motion toward God in obedience and love. It is a sacrificial motion of worship and adoration, which brought him into conflict with the sinfulness and selfishness of men, and thereby delivered him up to suffering and death at their hands, only to terminate in the sphere of the divine glory, in the total possession, even in his flesh, of the lifegiving presence of the Holy Spirit. By faith we participate in this motion.

There are different ways of considering how faith opens us to this inner dynamism of Christ's life. One is to see the whole mystery of Christ, from the moment that he assumed human nature until the glory of his second coming and beyond, as the great sacrament. Here is manifested God's efficacious intention to sanctify mankind, an intention which itself is outside all limitations of time and space, but is concretely embodied once and for all in the events of the life-history of the Son of God made man. As we contemplate those events in faith, God's sanctifying intention operates in us to bring us to the triumph where those events reached their climax: the resurrection and exaltation of Christ. For this reason St Paul speaks of our union with Christ in his victory as something already achieved by the power of God's love:

But God who is rich in mercy, on account of the very great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our sins, brought us to life together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and he raised us up with him and made us

¹ Rom 10, 8-9.

² Heb 10, 7.

sit with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus, in order to manifest in the ages to come the abundant riches of his grace in goodness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.¹

A still deeper insight into this consequence of faith in Christ comes from considering the influence of the Holy Spirit, the gift of the risen Christ to all who believe in him. Christ's whole life was led under the influence of the Holy Spirit. He was conceived by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit descended on him at his baptism as he was about to begin his ministry of announcing the good news of the kingdom. The Spirit led him into the desert, where he fasted forty days and forty nights and was tempted by the devil. He then came in the power of the Spirit into Galilee. When sometime later his apostles recounted the success of their ministry, he rejoiced in the Spirit. It was in the Spirit that he offered himself to God the Father on the cross. By the Spirit he was brought to life again, his whole humanity being completely energized by the divine life of the Spirit. It is from the fulness of his own possession of the Spirit that he pours out the divine gift on all who believe in him.

On the last day of the feast of Tabernacles, as his public life was approaching its end, he cried out in the temple, 'If any man thirsts, let him come to me, and let him who believes in me drink. For as the scripture says, From within him there shall flow rivers of living water'. To this St John significantly adds, 'Now he said this of the Spirit whom those who believe in him were to receive. For the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus had not yet been glorified'.²

This gift of the Spirit joins us to Christ and fills us with his life, and thereby makes us truly sons of God, living as he did a life under the Spirit that will come to its fulness at our own resurrection.³ Since faith opens to us the gift of the Spirit, and since Christ lives in us by his Spirit, it follows that Christ himself dwells in us through our faith in him. This is not merely a conclusion of theology, but the express teaching of sacred scripture. St Paul entreats God the Father for the Ephesians, 'that he may grant you according to the wealth of his glory to be powerfully strengthened by his Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell by faith in your hearts . . .'⁴ Faith so transformed Paul's own life that its inner principle was no longer himself but Christ in him: 'I live, no longer I, but Christ lives

¹ Eph 2, 4-8.

² Jn 7, 37-39.

³ Rom 8, 9-10, 14-16.

⁴ Eph 3, 16-17.

in me; what I now live in the flesh I live in the faith of the Son of God who loved me and handed himself over for me'.¹

Faith in Christ also leads us to union with the Father, to the primal source of the trinitarian life in God. The Spirit given to believers is the Spirit which makes us sons of the Father so that we call upon him as his children. Likewise, since through faith we receive Christ into our hearts, we receive the Father also, for he has assured us, 'He who receives me, receives him who sent me'.² And St Paul tells us how our faith in Christ gives us access to God the Father. For the Father has accomplished 'his eternal purpose in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and confident access through our faith in him'.³

Thus our justice before God, the rightness of our relationship to him that comes from faith in Christ, means that our sins are forgiven and he dwells in us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Through faith we are made temples of the Spirit, brothers and living members of Christ the Son, and children of the eternal Father.

Faith and the Moral Life

Since our relationship to God through faith in Christ is not merely static and legalistic, but living and real, it profoundly affects every aspect of our life. Faith in Christ lies at the heart of true Christian morality. For this is far more than the observance of an ethical code however lofty. It is the unfolding of Christ's life within us. As St Paul wrote to the Colossians expressing his satisfaction with their conduct: 'Although I am absent in the body, yet in the spirit I am with you, rejoicing and looking upon your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ. Therefore, as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, live in him, rooted and built up in him and made strong in the faith as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving'.⁴

Faith, as we have seen, joins the direction and movement of our life to Christ's, and we approach every situation in a spirit of love and obedience like his. Often this will mean for us, as it did for him, suffering and difficulty as we encounter forces hostile to the work of the Holy Spirit within us. These forces arise from our own selfishness, from the deceits of the devil, from the attraction of merely temporal values, and perhaps even from the malice and misunderstanding of others, as in the case of Christ. But all this deepens and purifies our faith and increases the joy of our ultimate union with

¹ Gal 2, 20.

² Mt 10, 40.

³ Eph 3, 11-12.

⁴ Col 2, 5-7.

God. St Peter, speaking about the last day when God's salvation will be fully revealed, said: 'Then you will rejoice, even though you may now have to suffer a little in different trials so that the genuineness of your faith, far more precious than perishable gold tried by fire, may shine forth for praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Without having seen him you love him; and though you do not now see him, yet believing in him you rejoice with a joy unspeakable and glorious, receiving as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls'.¹

A christian morality springing from faith should especially manifest itself in the unity and harmony of all those who have this faith. The New Testament often associates intimately faith in Christ with love of the brethren.² And Christ himself willed in a special way that the unity of those who believed in him might be a sign for all the world to see that he was indeed sent by the Father.³ This, of course, underlines the tragedy of the divisions presently separating christians. But at the same time it makes clear the need to be docile to the Holy Spirit and energetic in following his guidance as he leads us all to unity in Christ, and it encourages us to hope that in God's time and in God's way this will be achieved.

Closer to home we can observe that these broader dimensions of christian unity will not be realized if the living unity of Christ's mystical body is not whole-heartedly affirmed in practice by those who claim to be its members. St James warns against trying to mix faith in Jesus Christ with partiality towards persons based on their wealth and external appearance.⁴ Faith in Christ recognizes a brother equally in a rich man or a poor man, a white man or a black man, an educated man or an ignorant man, a titled noble or a common labourer.

It is through such genuine and practical faith that Christ living in us can influence the world around us and draw it to himself. At times during his public life he extended his power to some through the faith of others. St Matthew tells us how a group of men carried a friend lying paralyzed on his bed and brought him to Jesus. 'And Jesus seeing *their* faith, said to the paralytic, Take courage, son, your sins are forgiven'.⁵ Since his departure from the world in visible form, it has been through his church, through those whom faith makes his mystical body, that he continues to exercise his

¹ 1 Pet 1, 6-9.

² Jn 17, 21.

³ Cf Col 1, 4; Eph 1, 15; 1 Jn 3, 23.

⁴ Jas 2, 1-4.

⁵ Mt 9, 2.

ministry of mercy and power, of encouragement and understanding love. The effectiveness of that ministry is proportioned in some mysterious way to the genuineness and fulness of our faith in him.

Broader Effects of Faith

The influence of faith is not restricted to what some might choose to call the purely religious sphere. Without destroying or distorting anything that is truly human, faith gives a new dimension to every field of activity in which a man may engage according to his nature. Science, technology, art, recreation, work for social improvement and the dissemination of truth, historical research and the construction of buildings and highways, rearing a family and making a living: all these and more are caught up into the vision of faith and man's supernatural destiny in God. This is because faith views God's ultimate plan for man, his last end, and this necessarily comprehends and elevates all that a man may reasonably do. God has made human nature with all its inner possibilities and drives precisely in view of a supernatural purpose – not that he could not have made man with these same possibilities and drives for a natural purpose, one completely attainable by his inherent powers.

But, as a matter of fact, grace is not an afterthought in the divine order of things. It was God's first intention in creating man to make a family, sharing forever the interior life of the Holy Trinity, a society of sons and daughters responding in friendship to the offer of his love. And to reach that end he made man with the human nature we actually possess, and we cannot say without implicit blasphemy that anything pertaining to the unfolding and perfecting of this nature is irrelevant to the divine purpose. God sent his Son into the world as the new head of all creation, to repair the disorder of man's sin, and to direct everything in human existence to the transcendent goal of divine life. It is only as human wisdom pretends to be self-sufficient, or as human effort is ordered toward unworthy goals, that faith in Christ cannot directly link these activities to God's eternal purposes. Faith, it is true, does not lay down precise rules of procedure for individual fields of human activity. It does not tell a painter how to apply his colours, or an engineer how to build a bridge, or a mathematician how to solve an equation, but it takes the proper and distinctive purposes of these activities and joins them to the all-inclusive purpose of God's glory in Christ Jesus our Lord. In all that a man of faith does he is building up

the city of God. It is not always immediately clear how this is the case, and one of the most challenging interests of contemporary theology is to elaborate the christian understanding of human endeavour in all fields.

The Growth of Faith

The commitment of faith is supposed to grow, to be deepening insight into the mystery of Christ, an increasing dedication of ourselves to God. It is true that this growth is as much a work of God as the initial gift of faith itself. Being a virtue that does not spring from our own efforts but comes from the action of God in us, faith grows only as God communicates himself more and more to us. But this is not to say that our efforts are of no importance. We must pray as the father of the possessed boy prayed, 'I believe, Lord, help my unbelief'.¹ We must endeavour to remove the obstacles that stand in the way of the growth of faith: a too human concern for our own interests, a desire to make the best of both worlds, a fear really to take God at his word, etc. But more positively we must endeavour that as our personality develops, as our life matures, so our submission to Christ and our dedication to him grow as well.

This development of faith takes place above all in the community of the faithful, in the context of the living Church. No human personality develops alone and in isolation, not even in the supernatural order. The Church contributes in two special ways to the growth of faith: through the Word of God contained in sacred scripture and proclaimed especially in the liturgy, and through the sacraments of the Church, especially the holy Eucharist, 'the mystery of faith'.

St Paul wrote to Timothy: 'But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with sacred scripture, which is able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus'.² Sacred scripture is above all the Church's book, formed within her, guarded by her, passed on to all men from her hands. Hence, whenever we respond in faith to the Word of God in scripture, whether in the great moments of its proclamation in the liturgy or even in private meditation, we join ourselves to the life of the Church and open our hearts to the vivifying Spirit of God who animates the Church. Here faith grows as God speaks to us and we

¹ Mk 9, 24.

² 2 Tim 3, 14-15.

respond according to the light and grace he gives us.

All seven sacraments of the Church contain in different ways Christ's worship of the Father made present to us in sensible signs. Hence, as we receive them in faith our lives are sanctified, our faith is deepened, and our personal union with Christ made more firm and close. But the great sacrament of faith is the holy Eucharist. Here the faithful as a community, as the people of God, gather to worship God through Christ their Mediator, with Christ their Brother, in Christ their Head. They plunge their lives into the sacrificial movement of Christ's life at the very place where this movement reaches its fulness, where the eternal Father accepts the offering of his Son and glorifies him. For it is the risen Christ who is offered in the Mass, Christ who has passed in obedience and love through death to glory at the right hand of the Father. And in Holy Communion we are nourished by the body and blood of the risen Lord, that he may fill us with his life in the Spirit and direct us to the glory of his Resurrection, and make us all one in himself.¹ Perhaps there is no more certain sign of the growth of faith than the deepening awareness of our oneness in Christ.

The Consummation of Faith

Faith, unlike charity, is not destined to abide forever. It looks beyond the struggles of this life to a knowledge in friendship where every veil is removed, and we look directly upon the face of God our Father, behold the eternal glory of his Son, and discover the deep things of their divine Spirit.²

Faith in Christ leads to 'death in the Lord',³ which though an end to mortal life does not properly deserve to be called death, for, as he said, 'Everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die'.⁴ Finally, faith will reach its fullest triumph, 'the victory which overcomes the world',⁵ in the perfect realization of the Father's loving intention at the resurrection of the body: 'This is the will of my Father who sent me that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life and I should raise him up on the last day'.⁶ Then Christ's prayer for us all will be fulfilled: 'Father, I will that those whom you have given me should be with me where I am, that they may see my glory which you have given me, because you loved me before the foundation of the world'.⁷

¹ Jn 6, 35, 54; Cor 10, 16-17.

⁴ Jn 11, 26.

⁵ 1 Jn 5, 4.

² Heb 12, 1-2.

⁶ Jn 6, 40.

³ Cf Apoc 14, 12-13.

⁷ Jn 17, 24.