

TWO ASPECTS OF FAITH

1. Faith is related to the truth

Faith is not a personal preference, or a mere whim. That is not faith in God but faith in oneself. The Gospel according to John makes considerable use of Jesus' "signs", acts of Jesus that were connected to this real world in time and place. The whole fabric of the Gospel, including the greatest sign of all, Jesus' resurrection is factual. The two chief proofs for Jesus' resurrection were Old Testament prophecies of it, and the witness of the apostles to it. They saw, touched, and heard Jesus after He rose.

Those kinds of claims, which are related to this real world, have to run the risk that contrary evidence may disprove them. From that point of view, we cannot blame Thomas for wanting to be sure. Thomas took the hard-headed, cynical line, "Unless I see the marks of the nails in His hands and put my finger into the marks of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I shall certainly not believe." We have a common saying, "Seeing is believing," and that was Thomas' line. He did not want to rely on something that was untrue.

The point of John's report about Thomas' confession, "My Lord, and my God" is that his cynical demand to see in order to believe was answered by seeing the risen Lord. Jesus told Thomas, "Put your finger here, and look at My hands; and take your hand and put it into My side. And stop your unbelief, and believe!" Seeing Jesus removed the disciples' earlier doubts. Our faith in Jesus' resurrection rests on the testimony of those chosen witnesses, who saw, touched, and heard Him after He rose. Their hands, eyes, and ears become ours by proxy. Our faith rests on their witness, and through that inspired witness the Holy Spirit works faith in us. Faith is reliance on God on the basis of His word.

2. Believing is not seeing.

From one point of view, believers have confidence in God when evidence in this real world seems to be contrary. God does what to human beings looks impossible. Abraham believed God's promise to give him the land of Canaan, but when he died all he owned was the cave where he had buried Sarah. Abraham believed God's promise about a son when his body and that of Sarah were as good as dead. God is one who raises the dead, and brings things into existence that do not exist. God often seems to work in riddles. God had promised to bless all nations through Isaac. However, He then told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. The second word from God seemed to contradict the earlier promise. The only way Abraham could proceed to sacrifice Isaac and continue to believe was to trust that, if need be, God could raise Isaac from the dead in order to fulfil His promise.

Hebrews chapter 11 has the theme that faith is being convinced about things that we cannot see. The heroes of faith that the chapter refers to all had God's approval without receiving what God promised them. The writer concludes, "God provided something better for us in order to have them reach their goal with us."

St Paul wrote, "We live by faith, not by sight." In this sense, sight belongs to the glory to come. We trust God, though we do not yet see His promises fulfilled. This aspect of faith comes early in the Gospel according to John. Nathanael was amazed that Jesus said that He had seen him under the fig tree before Philip called him. Jesus told him, "You believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that." He referred to the future time when Nathanael would see the angels attending Jesus, as the link between heaven and earth.

Jesus scolded the apostles for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed the women who had seen Him after He had been raised. Jesus had sent the women to the apostles with the message "We have seen the Lord." Jesus expected His apostles to believe His message, even without seeing Him in person.

In the Gospel according to John there is a tension between Jesus' signs and people's demand for signs. Very early in Jesus' ministry, after Jesus cleansed the temple, the Jews asked Him, "What miraculous sign do you show to us, seeing that You are doing these things?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I shall raise it in three days." On another occasion Jesus told Jews who were demanding a sign from God that no sign would be given them except the sign of the prophet Jonah. He meant His own bodily resurrection on the third day. That was, for Him, the greatest sign of all. We believe Jesus' signs, but a demand for signs does not indicate faith, but doubt and unbelief. Demanding to see is not believing.

That helps us to understand Jesus' words to Thomas: "Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Jesus appeared only to chosen witnesses after His resurrection. Although the seeing of the risen Jesus by the apostles was a pivotal point in the Gospel message, our faith is believing without seeing. Although we do not see the risen Lord, we rely on the apostolic and

prophetic testimony that He has risen.