

What Is Faith? Listen to the Testimony of Four Witnesses

Genesis 17:1-8

Hebrews 11:1-3; 8-12

John 14:1-9

Mark 1:14-15

It happened at the corner of Major McKenzie and Yonge St. It was a collision. A crowd gathered quickly, as crowds always do. But the crowd was no help once police officers and insurance adjusters and lawyers wanted to know what happened. These people weren't interested in hearing from the crowd; they wanted to hear from witnesses.

When the handful of witnesses (witnesses are always fewer than crowds) began to testify, their testimony had much in common. It couldn't be doubted they were all speaking of the same collision. At the same time, no two witnesses said exactly the same thing. Each testimony differed slightly according to the witness's angle of vision on the event.

No one thought of saying that only one witness could be right and therefore all others were wrong. *Precisely because* different witnesses bring forward slightly differing testimonies we know that their story is authentic. We know that they haven't conspired secretly to fabricate something artificial.

In the days of his earthly ministry Jesus Christ collided with many persons and many institutions. The "collision" which he was invariably drew a crowd. But the crowd he drew can't help us to understand what happened when our Lord acted then and what continues to happen when he acts among us now. For this we need the testimony of witnesses. Their testimony is indispensable in our coming to grasp who Jesus Christ is and what faith in him entails.

As we receive their testimony we shall find that these witnesses agree in essence concerning Jesus Christ. Nevertheless we shall find too that different witnesses highlight different insights. This fact only reassures us that their testimony is authentic and therefore can be trusted.

In the course of the many collisions he occasioned Jesus summoned men and women to join him. He summoned them to faith in him. He promised to sustain and strengthen their faith. He summons, sustains and strengthens today as well. Then there's one, crucial issue for us to sort out: What does faith in Jesus Christ mean? What does it entail? In order to answer this question we must receive the testimony of four witnesses: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Today, however, we are going to listen to them in reverse order: John, Luke, Mark and Matthew.

I: -- First, John. Faith, says the apostle John, is the *conviction* that Jesus Christ is the mirror-image of God the Father, the conviction that Jesus Christ is the living presence of God embodied in our flesh and blood. Faith is also *confidence* in the mission and message of this Emmanuel, “God-with-us.” Faith is also *confession* of loyalty to him. According to John faith always entails conviction, confidence, confession.

Phillip is a disciple, a follower, who happens to be tossed around by the turbulence that always surrounds Jesus. After months of being jostled and jarred, months of being thrown off-balance just when he thought he had everything figured out, Phillip hungers for one, conclusive disclosure of God. “Just show us the Father and that will be enough,” he cries to Jesus. “Phillip,” replies the Master, “to see me *is* to see the one you want. *I am* the disclosure you crave.”

It’s odd, isn’t it: the answer that satisfied Phillip irks people today. “To see me is to see the Father,” says Jesus, and this annoys people today. “How narrow,” they complain, “how insufferably narrow.”

I admit it *is* narrow. If John had said that the living Word of God, God’s self-utterance and self-giving – if John had said that this Word became words, human speech, speeches, no one would object. But John never says that the Word became words, speeches, chatter. John insists that the Word has become flesh. One man; one man only. From Nazareth at that, a one-horse town. (Nazareth was to Jerusalem, in terms of sophistication and glamour, what ‘Podunksville’ today is to Paris.) What’s more, “flesh” for John refers not only to human existence; “flesh” also means concrete human existence under the conditions of sin. Then is John telling us that the Word became flesh, that God has identified himself wholly with a hayseed from Nazareth who in turn has identified himself with sinners? Yes, John is saying exactly this. God is to be found definitively in a one-horse town in the person of an ordinary Jew who is also “numbered among the transgressors.” In this one man God has drawn so very near to us that he couldn’t draw nearer.

If you are irked by the supposed narrowness of John’s conviction and confession and you are starting to fidget, please note what is *not* said.

1: It is *not* said that God has neglected or forsaken people who are non-Christians. Nevertheless it is in Jesus Christ that we *learn* that God neither neglects nor forsakes anyone.

2: It is *not* said that God isn't free to disclose himself as he wishes. Nevertheless, the witnesses we are hearing and heeding today were convinced that in Jesus Christ God can always be found *for sure*.

3: It is *not* said that while God may be present with all peoples, God is *active* only in the history of Israel, the one people who gave us Jesus. As a matter of fact Amos tells us that just as God was active in Israel's history, bringing the Israelites up out of Egypt, so God has been active, no less active, in the history of the Philistines and the Syrians. Nevertheless, in Jesus Christ we can *identify* what God is doing in human history among diverse peoples.

4: It is *not* said that God has been sensed only in Jesus of Nazareth. Nevertheless, in the man from Nazareth God has seized us with a clarity and cogency that constrains us to speak of him and forbids us to remain silent.

Faith, says John, is the conviction that Jesus Christ is the living address of the God who has come among us in our own humanness and identified himself with us in our sinfulness. Faith is also confidence in this man's mission and message. In addition faith is public confession of our loyalty to him.

II: -- Luke. For Luke Jesus is all that Jesus is for John, together with Luke's particular angle of vision; namely, for Luke Jesus is especially the friend of those whom the world laughs at, or laughs off, or overlooks, or conveniently prefers to forget. For Luke Jesus is the friend of the least, the lonely, the last and the lost. As a witness Luke has noticed that Jesus consistently stands up for and stands with anyone who is trampled or rejected or simply defenceless.

Women for instance. In Luke's day women were often regarded as little more than an item of their husband's property. A divorcee or a widow was extraordinarily vulnerable. Not only was she brushed aside as a "no-account," she was financially strapped as well. In his testimony to Jesus Luke mentions thirteen women who are not mentioned in any other written gospel. Perceptively Luke noticed that Jesus honoured women and elevated them.

Luke's heart is as big as a house when he thinks of those whom life has ground down or when he thinks of the struggle, relentless struggle, that renders life ceaselessly difficult for some people. Yet

Luke's heart is as big as a house only because he has first found his Lord's heart even bigger. He has witnessed Christ's concern for social outcasts – such as the swindler who fleeces people and turns the entire community against himself (Zacchaeus,) or the dying terrorist (concerning whom people mutter, “Good riddance,”) or the hooker from the red light district. Not to mention the poor. Luke testifies most movingly of Christ's care for the poor and his esteem for those people.

There is something else. More than any other witness Luke speaks of joy, rejoicing, laughter, merriment, partying. He knows that Christ's concern for the overwhelmed and underfed, the “loser” and the outcast, the defenceless and the diseased; he knows our Lord's championing of these people is never shrill, never grim. There's neither the grimness of the steely do-gooder nor the nastiness of those who want to bring down the privileged. There's only irrepressible joy that these people, the marginalized, have a place in God's Kingdom. Jesus laughs and jokes and parties with them all. Everything our Lord does for those sunk in misery he does so very cheerfully as to render them cheerful ever after.

When Maureen and I first visited the Iona Community of the Church of Scotland (located in the Hebridean Islands) we met several people who go there for much-needed restoration just because their work unfolds every day among the seemingly hopeless, the impoverished, of Britain's slums. One middle-aged woman we met works among the “squatters,” as they are called in the shabbiest parts of London. As residents move out of subsidized housing for any reason at all, workmen are hired to refurbish the newly-vacated apartment. Before the workmen can follow on the heels of the outgoing residents, however, squatters move in and take over. Any attempt at ousting them precipitates ugly confrontations with the squatters themselves; with sympathetic neighbours, and with beleaguered police officers. The woman we met works among these squatters (whose building is now called “the squats”) on behalf of the London Housing Authority. She often finds herself in fearsome situations.

We mustn't paint the picture any less bleak than it is. The squatters' material future is dismal beyond telling. They have nothing to lose, and therefore are quick to become violent. It takes no little courage to work among them. Yet it takes more than courage; it takes a special sort of huge-hearted humanness that silently gains the trust of desperate people.

This particular woman says she loves her work. She senses in it the surge of God's Kingdom. As she spoke of it to Maureen and me she glowed. And she does it all with a radiance that her people see in few others. Her joy in the midst of them is a manifestation of that Kingdom which knows no misery.

Faith, according to the apostle Luke, entails living in the company of Jesus Christ as *he* moves among the loneliest and the least and the last.

III: -- Mark's angle of vision is slightly different again, therein acquainting us with his particular insight and emphasis. Mark testifies that faith means holding up Christ's victory anywhere there seems to be human defeat. Mark has observed that Jesus is the conquering one. Mark sees Jesus taking on hostile power after hostile power: sin, sickness, sorrow, suffering, the demonic. These hostile powers are really errand-boys, "go-fors", flunkies, who do the bidding of Mr. Big, the comprehensive hostile power, death. Mr. Big, death, has many errand-boys or flunkies. These lesser powers molest you and me and others. Not content with molesting us, they torment us. Sin torments all of us. Sickness torments and teases the ill. Sorrow continues to torment the bereaved long after they expected sorrow to leave them alone. Death's errand-boys wear us down. They crumble our resistance to Mr. Big, who gets every one of us at the last.

However, Mark announces, Jesus Christ is Conqueror. Death overtook him only to find him overtaking it. Death frustrated him only to be frustrated itself as he was raised from the dead.

Faith in Jesus Christ, Mark testifies, is a matter of holding up Christ's victory wherever anyone is molested and tormented by Mr. Big's flunkies who soften us up for Mr. Big himself. As you and I are possessed of faith we soak ourselves in Christ's victory; we are steeped in such assurance of *his* triumph that our assurance fortifies the assurance of those who are harassed at this moment.

A pastor, everyone knows, is expected to attend the dying. But not because the pastor has a pre-recorded bedside message he can flip on. A pastor attends the dying for one reason: he has Christ's victory so deep in his bloodstream that he radiates it; it oozes out of him, even if he says nothing.

It's the same with all Christ's people. We sit with our friend who is ill. We sit with our friend whose husband, aged forty-seven, has just been carried off with a heart attack. We visit someone whose elderly

parent has deteriorated mentally and is all but unrecognizable, yet manages to arouse sadness and shame and anger and guilt in his family all at once. We sit, and we say little. We are possessed of such assurance of our Lord's victory that our assurance, as deep as our DNA, spills over onto our friend and finds its way past her tears.

Faith, says Mark, is being drawn into Christ's triumph, being forever altered by it, and thereafter flaunting that triumph in the face of everything that wants to deny it.

IV: -- For **Matthew** faith is all that it is for all witnesses alike: public acknowledgement that Jesus is the Son of God Incarnate, the Word become flesh, the Messiah of Israel and the Saviour of the World. All witnesses agree in this matter. Yet Matthew too has his particular angle of vision; namely, faith is hearing and heeding and obeying the chief rabbi. Matthew's gospel, 28 chapters long, is divided into five blocks of teaching. The five blocks of teaching correspond to the five books of Moses. Jesus is clearly Moses enlarged. When Jesus begins teaching the Sermon on the Mount he *sits* to teach. Rabbis always sat to teach. To be sure, Jesus is more than a rabbi, Matthew would insist, but he's a rabbi at least, greater in authority than Moses; Jesus is the rabbi above all other rabbis. Therefore we must hear him and heed him and obey him.

Admittedly, it's relatively easy to support (with Mark) our suffering brothers and sisters as we surround them with our assurance of Christ's victory. (In fact, we feel good about doing this.) It's easy to agree (with Luke) that Jesus cherished the poor and the maimed and the trampled, and therefore we should support them too. It's easy to assent (with John) to the truth that Jesus is the Word made flesh. Yet it's always possible to do all of this while remaining indifferent to our own concrete, specific obedience. Matthew insists that to have faith in Jesus means we are going to obey him, *do* it.

Jesus tells us, for instance, that if we write off another human being, or merely speak contemptuously of her, we are in danger of ultimate loss ourselves. If we act compassionately only toward those whom we think to deserve our compassion, then we haven't a clue about the nature of God. If we think that God is going to forgive us at the same as we harden our heart against those who have wounded us, then we are pathetically mistaken. If we come to worship on Sunday without having attempted to repair the

breach with another congregant, we are wasting our time. We mustn't evade the road we've been appointed to walk, even if the road is narrow and the way hard and those who persist in it few. Of course the road we're appointed to walk is challenging at all times and difficult at some times. Were it anything else we'd be meandering or shuffling or sashaying or even strolling, merely strolling. Matthew says the Christian life isn't a stroll; it's a resolute walking of that way which Jesus says identifies us as his people, since he walks the same road with us. This road ever remains the road we *must* walk if we are going to remain in the company of Jesus, for he is the companion of those who walk *this* road and he pledges himself nowhere else.

I began today by reminding us that our Lord collided with all sorts of individuals and institutions in the days of his earthly ministry. The collision that he was attracted crowds, as collisions always attract crowds. Crowds, however, are mere onlookers. Witnesses, on the other hand, are part of the event. The witnesses we call 'apostles' testify to Jesus Christ, even as they testify to him from their own perspective.

The testimony of John – faith in Jesus is conviction that he is Emmanuel, God-with-us, confidence in his mission, and confession of the truth concerning him – John's testimony is bedrock for the other three.

On top of this Luke testifies that Jesus is the friend of the lowly and the despised; Mark, that Jesus is the conqueror of everything that threatens to separate us from God, death pre-eminently; Matthew, that Jesus is the chief rabbi whom we haven't truly heard unless we've aspired to obey.

Jesus tells us that even the person of the strongest faith, apparently, is actually weak in faith. For this reason, he insists, we are to pray for increased faith, strengthened faith. Then may you and I cry to God, "Increase our faith," knowing that he wants this for us even more than we want it for ourselves.