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**Faith (Luke 5.1-11)**

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‘And now, faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love’ (1 Cor. 13.13). These words, written by St Paul to the community of Christians at Corinth, are among the best-known in the New Testament. Most of you will have heard them read, perhaps many times, at weddings and funerals. They come from a passage often described as a ‘hymn to love’ and they express what seems to matter most in human life. To keep faith with the good; to be open to possibility; to love truly and freely and deeply. In the tradition, faith, hope and love are considered the key virtues of Christian life, because it’s from these that the proper shape of all other virtues, all true thought and reconciling action, flow.

We’re embarking on another year in community in a global context that feels profoundly unstable, even dangerous. Added to the tragically familiar catalogue of injustice and atrocity sourced in war, famine and greed, we seem now faced with the risk of a more encompassing breakdown of the rules based international order. Of course, this order has always been flawed; it’s always privileged some more than others. But it afforded at least a kind of predictability, a set of processes and agreed norms. Whether it will collapse, whether its collapse will ultimately be seen to be good, who knows? All we can be reasonably sure of for now, given the radical upheavals initiated by the current US administration, is that there will be collateral damage, and that navigating our way in these times will be perilous.

St Paul wrote: ‘And now, faith, hope and love abide, these three’. In a world where everything seems suddenly up for grabs, it may be timely to explore what abides and how it helps; and to wonder how abiding faith, abiding hope, abiding love may grow in and work through us. So for the next three weeks, I’d like to reflect on each of these virtues in turn, starting today with faith.

What is faith? In the first instance, it's the disposition to trust something or someone. We speak of putting our faith in certain people or causes. We speak of our inclination to trust certain information or testimony, saying 'I'm happy to take that on faith'. As we all know, faith can be misplaced or betrayed; something we trust may turn out to be untrustworthy, someone in whom we have faith turns out to be faithless. So it matters in what and in whom we put our faith. Which is why, the Christian *virtue* of faith is defined not just as the disposition to trust in general, but as the disposition, or the gift, of trusting in God. According to the Catechism of the Roman Catholic church, 'Faith is the theological virtue by which we believe in God and believe all that [God] has said and revealed to us'.<sup>1</sup>

From the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, he invited people to have faith in him, to trust his intentions and believe what he said. In all four gospels, one of the earliest episodes involves Jesus calling his disciples. We just heard Luke's version of this story and it is, I think, a beautiful meditation on the process of coming to authentic faith. According to the gospel narrative, Jesus has already been garnering a reputation in the region. He's been speaking in synagogues, healing the sick and casting out demons. The crowds gather when he appears, 'pressing in on him to hear the word of God'. They've seen him at work and they're beginning to trust he has truth to share. On this occasion, he's standing beside the lake of Gennesaret when he spies two empty boats: 'the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets'. Pressed by the crowd, Jesus got into one of these boats, the one belonging to Simon whose mother-in-law he'd cured of a fever just a few verses earlier, and he asked Simon to put out from the shore. Simon obliged, enabling Jesus to teach the crowd from the boat.

Then comes a different kind of call on Simon's trust. When he'd finished speaking, Jesus said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch'. Deeper water is, of course, where the fish might be, but it's also a

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<sup>1</sup>[https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part\\_three/section\\_one/chapter\\_one/article\\_7/ii\\_the\\_theological\\_virtues.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part_three/section_one/chapter_one/article_7/ii_the_theological_virtues.html)

metaphor for mystery and divinity, deep calling to deep; putting out into the deep implies risk and the ceding of at least some level of control. And Simon, who's been out all night fishing for little reward, isn't sure it's worth it. Yet, 'if you say so, I will let down the nets'. Immediately, his trust in Jesus' direction is repaid: 'they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break', so many fish that two boats were filled to the brink.

And suddenly, Simon realises that something's going on here that exceeds all earthly bounds, all his former sense of the world. And just as the prophet Isaiah, when confronted with a vision of God in the Temple had cried out 'Woe is me! I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts' (Isa. 6.5), so Simon falls before Jesus crying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man' (Luke 5.8). For the truth is that an experience of the overwhelming presence and fullness and holiness of God will make us profoundly aware of our own lack and misalignment. For me, at times, there's been the painful revelation of the pettiness of my concerns, the inadequacy of my love, and my helplessness to be different or do better. 'Go away from me, Lord'. But Jesus says to Simon, 'Do not be afraid'. This isn't about getting stuck in what's lacking or inadequate in you. It's about becoming who you're called to be; it's about daring to live from now on in response to what you've seen of God's abundance and mercy and grace. Little wonder then, that 'When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him'.

James Alison has written that the whole point of Jesus' ministry was to create faith, enable humanity to trust in God. Trust in the God whose nature is revealed by Jesus as abundantly giving; whose parental care is to seek out the rejected, heal the sick, transform us by truth, and welcome the stranger. Jesus, by his own radically trusting relationship with God, reveals that this is the reality, the love, whose life cannot be cancelled by the violence of the world and who is for us and with us, whatever befalls. And if this reality really is the truth of things, the ground of being, it changes everything. It changes how we experience ourselves, how we desire to

shape our common life, how we share the life of the world and endure its suffering and injustice.

But how do we learn this faith? How do we come to entrust ourselves to it? If we are not first-hand witnesses, as the disciples were, what makes it possible to believe the gospel's story that the nature of ultimate reality is loving, gracious, merciful? After all, given the way things go in our world, this is a difficult vision to sustain. If we think of the magnitude of the world's suffering and the many triumphs of evil, faith in the enduring goodness and presence of God can seem literally incredible. What if this vision of things is all a giant delusion, an irresponsible and consoling fantasy.

Well, maybe it is. But John Main said that in meditation we may discover the truth of faith in our own experience and that as we consent (however fitfully and imperfectly) to be present to Presence, then the possibility of faith becomes real. My own sense is that through contemplative practice we can increasingly know God as Jesus did, not as an object of our perception, but as the ground of our being. As this awareness grows, then even in times of distress and confusion, when we struggle with a sense of meaninglessness and are tempted to give up on it all, we may discover almost despite ourselves that we are faith-*ful* – full of faith. There comes a point where we cannot but keep trusting this fragile sense of the truth of things. Somehow it will not let us go. The gift of faith has taken root and we find ourselves resonating with Simon Peter's response to Jesus: 'Lord, to whom else shall we go? You have the words of eternal life'.

Why does this matter? How does it make a difference? It matters because from this trust, this abiding faith, is born a different quality of courage, a deepened capacity for patience and endurance; and a new experience of the possible. From this abiding faith is born the virtue of authentic hope – to which we turn next week.