

Faith Leading to Faith (John 4:43-54) – Encounters with Jesus 11: The Royal Official

As Christians we talk a lot about faith, but are there different kinds of faith? In John's gospel we are presented with Jesus encountering a wide variety of people. This encounter shows how Jesus helps someone move from one kind of faith to another.

Sermon am: John 4:43-54, Faith Leading to Faith

Aim: To help move people to a deeper faith in Jesus and to see the need to encourage others to do the same.

Brexit means Brexit...

Before Covid, the big thing that dominated our news was Brexit, the decision in a referendum to leave the European Union.

Theresa May became Prime Minister in 2016 after the referendum. It was her task to see us through Brexit. So, she came to power with a mantra:

"Brexit means Brexit."

I guess the idea was to show that the government was going to take the referendum result seriously!

The problem that beset our politics for the next few years, was that it was very hard to agree what 'Brexit' meant! Some felt it meant leaving the European Union, but wanted to maintain as close a trading relationship as possible, whilst others felt that that was a kind of half-way house Brexit. They wanted a different kind of Brexit, one which involved a much looser relationship with the European Union.

Despite her slogan, Brexit means Brexit, Theresa May's premiership was destroyed because people could not agree on what kind of Brexit they wanted. Sometimes one word is not enough. Sometimes it is important to be clearer what we mean by something.

There are a number of key words for Christians. One of those words is 'faith.' 'Faith' is a much more positive word than 'Brexit', it is more about coming into a relationship than leaving one, it is about reconciliation not separation. But like Brexit, by itself the word, 'faith' is not always clear enough. The kind of faith we mean is really important.

We need to ask ourselves is my faith the kind that truly brings me into a true relationship with God or is it a faith that is only halfway to what is needed?

Faith in John's Gospel

In John's gospel in particular, the word 'faith' or 'belief' is a really important word and concept. At the end of the gospel, John tells us why he has written the gospel:

"But these are written **that you may believe** that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

(John 20:31)

He wants us to have faith in Jesus, because in doing so we find eternal life.

But John's gospel is far more than a slogan. He shows us Jesus encountering all sorts of different people and as he does so he explores different the kinds of faith people have in Jesus.

In the first few chapters of the gospel, we have seen the disciples introduced to Jesus by John the Baptist, then putting their faith in him, when they see him turn water into wine at a wedding in Cana in Galilee.

Then, we are told Jesus goes to Jerusalem for a festival. There he also performs miracles or signs and it says this about the people there:

"Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men." (John 2:23-24)

Here the people see Jesus doing miraculous signs and so they believe in him, they have faith in his name, but it seems clear that this is not the same kind of faith as the disciples. It is a shallow faith, a half-way house kind of faith.

In chapter 3, Jesus has an encounter with Nicodemus an important Pharisee. Nicodemus seems to represent those who have faith in Jesus, because of his miracles. He says,

"Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no-one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." (John 3:2)

Jesus responds by telling Nicodemus that he needs to be born again. In other words, Jesus is looking for the kind of faith which involves the embracing of a completely new identity and status as a child of God not just a vague belief that Jesus is from God.

Then in chapter 4, Jesus leaves Jerusalem and goes to Samaria. There he encounters a Samaritan woman, who has a rather dodgy relationship history. Yet, through her and what Jesus says, the village of Samaritans come to believe that Jesus is 'the Saviour of the World'. Without even seeing a sign they seem to embrace Jesus in a way that goes far beyond any of those in Jerusalem who had seen his signs and shared his Jewish identity.

So, already, as John shows us different encounters with Jesus, he is exploring different kinds of faith. Some seem to be almost fully there like that of the disciples or Samaritan's whilst others are shallow a kind of half-way house to true faith.

This is the context of our passage, a passage which in a way draws to a conclusion this first section of John, because it takes us back to that story at the beginning of chapter 2. We are back in Galilee, back at Cana and we see what John calls the second sign, a second miracle that Jesus performs.

Yet, the focus of the story is not so much on the miracle or sign, but on the faith of the royal official that encounters Jesus. It is a faith that moves through three key stages... A faith that moves from faith to faith.

Three stages of faith:

1. 999 Faith: Jesus, a help in emergency

The first stage is what I want to call a 999 Faith. A belief that Jesus can help in an emergency.

At the start of the reading, we are told that Jesus returns to Cana in Galilee. He is back in his own neighbourhood. We are also told that the people welcome him back, because they, like him, had been to the festival in Jerusalem and had seen the miracles he had done there.

That all seems very positive, welcoming Jesus shows some kind of faith in him. Yet, this is the same kind of faith, that back at the end of chapter 2, we are told Jesus did not trust. Here, too we are told that Jesus says that a prophet has no honour in his own country.

This reminds us that this kind of faith is not enough, it is the kind of faith that is focussed on Jesus as a miracle maker and nothing more. Someone who can help when you are in trouble, but you don't need to worry or be concerned about him the rest of the time. A bit like the 999 emergency services today. We are pleased they are there to help when needed, but otherwise we have nothing to do with them.

At this point John introduces us to the Royal Official. He does have an emergency. His son is seriously ill. He lives in Capernaum another town in Galilee, so he would have picked up on the general attitude to Jesus. Here is someone to be welcomed, someone who does amazing miracles, someone who can help in time of trouble.

So, hearing that Jesus was in Galilee and desperate to save his son, the Royal Official sets off from Capernaum, early in the morning to trek the 14 miles to Cana. Jesus seems to be his son's only hope.

When he finds Jesus he begs Jesus to come back with him to Capernaum to heal his son. Otherwise it looked like his son would die.

Jesus's response at first glance seems completely un-pastoral and unloving:

"Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders, you will never believe." (John 4:48)

What is Jesus doing? Doesn't he care about the father's anguish and pain? Doesn't he care for the well-being of his son? Is this really the moment to start a debate about different kinds of faith?

Of course, Jesus was concerned for those things - as the rest of the story bears out. But for Jesus there was a deeper pastoral need that he wanted to tackle.

He saw that like so many in Galilee, this man was stuck in a 999-faith, that believed in Jesus only for the help that Jesus thought he could provide. It was a faith focussed on Jesus's signs, not on Jesus himself.

Jesus's seemingly harsh statement is a deeply loving attempt to move this man beyond the 999-faith he was stuck in.

- At this point we need to ask ourselves is this the kind of faith in Jesus you have? Is your faith in Jesus limited to seeing him as someone that you can turn to in time of need? Is your faith a merely 999-faith?

That's not a bad place to start, but it is not a good place to get stuck. Perhaps today, Jesus is challenging you to a deeper kind of faith?

2. Faith without Sight: Taking Jesus at His Word

The man could have taken offense at Jesus or responded defensively, but instead he throws himself on Jesus's compassion.

'Sir, come down before my son dies!' (John 4:49)

This in a sense is a positive step. He is not trying to show Jesus that he is worthy of his help, rather he is appealing to the character of Jesus and of God, a character underpinned by love. It shows a faith that depends on who Jesus is, rather than on who I am.

But, although Jesus responds to the man's plea with compassion and love for the situation, he is still concerned to push this man's faith beyond the 999-mentality.

The man assumes that Jesus would come with him and heal his son, but Jesus does not do that. Rather, Jesus tells him to 'Go back by himself, but promises that his son will be well.'

Suddenly, the man has to accept Jesus's word without seeing the sign. He had to leave trusting that what Jesus had said was true, but with no evidence or proof that it was true at all. This required a much deeper step of faith, than if Jesus had gone down with him. Could he trust Jesus's word without seeing the sign?

At the end of John's gospel, Thomas refuses to believe what he has been told about Jesus rising from the dead. Then Jesus appears to him and proves that it is true.

But, Jesus goes on to say to Thomas:

"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20:29).

Jesus had said that people will not believe unless they see signs and wonders. Now this royal official is asked to believe that his Son would be well, without seeing the sign first.

But he does. He takes the needed step of faith, he takes Jesus at his word.

- For us today, God asks us to believe the good news. The message about Jesus that we read about in the Bible and hear about in the church. We have to believe without seeing the signs Jesus does, we simply have to believe the message.

Are you willing to believe the good news about Jesus, without God proving it to you. Are you willing to take that step of faith, without seeing God work a miracle?

Or will you be like the others and only believe if you see the signs? If so, are you doomed to be stuck in the wrong kind of faith?

3. Faith in Jesus: Following Jesus

The man's faith pays off. It leads to the life of his son. He discovers that Jesus's word comes true.

On the way home the next day, the man is met by servants travelling to find him. His son is well! He is not going to die.

At this point the royal official could have simply breathed a huge sigh of relief and rejoiced that his son was well.

But, now the man wants to know. Was this down to Jesus. Had Jesus's word proved true. Was his step of faith to take Jesus at his word the right thing to do?

So, he asks the servants, when his Son got better. It was at the 7th hour, or one in the afternoon. It was at the moment when Jesus said, 'Go your son will be well!'

Jesus had proved true to his word.

This was a profound moment for the Royal Official. Now it says, 'he and his whole household believed.' What has happened? In a sense he already believed. He had come to Jesus, because he believed Jesus could perform a miracle of healing. He had already taken Jesus at his word, a step of faith that what Jesus said was true.

But now something more is meant. Now this man believes. Now he does not just believe in what Jesus can do or what Jesus says, now he believes in Jesus. Now he knows Jesus is saviour of the world, now he has taken on a new identity, he has been born again as he puts his trust fully in the person of Jesus. Now he has believed for eternal life.

And it was not just this royal official, but his whole household and who knows who else as a result of him.

The fact he was a royal official means he would have had a key position as an official for Herod the Tetrarch, who was the Roman appointed ruler of Galilee.

In Luke's gospel we are told that there were various women who travelled with and supported Jesus and his disciples. Among these was Joanna, the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household.

Could it be that Chuza was this royal official, or that this woman became such a keen follower of Jesus because of the royal official and his family in this story?

Again in Acts 13:1, we are told that one of the prophets and teachers in the church in Antioch was Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch).

Could Manaen have been the royal official of this story or did he come to faith because of the royal official and his family in this story?

We cannot know those answers for sure, but clearly there were some right at the heart of Herod's household who came to a full and life giving faith in Jesus as God's Son, not just as a helpful miracle worker.

What kind of faith do you have?

So, what kind of faith do you have?

Is it a 999-faith that believes that Jesus is there to help out in emergencies?

Is it one that is dependent on God performing miracles in your life?

Or is it one that takes Jesus at his word? That believes not just in what Jesus might do for you, but is committed to identifying yourself fully with Jesus as the Saviour of the World?