

# Homily for Sunday, August 23, 2009

## Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost

By JoAnn Taylor

**First Lesson**      **1 Kings 8:(1,6,10-11),22-30,41-43**

**Psalm**              **84**

**Second Lesson**    **Ephesians 6:10-20**

**Gospel**             **John 6:56-69**

...in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit – creator, sustainer, and sanctifier. Amen.

There is a short story told in Islam about Ayesha, the young and beautiful wife of the prophet Mohammed. One day she asked her husband this question, “Do you love me best?” His answer was swift and firm, “No! Kadijah, who is now old and withered, believed in me when no one else did. She will always come first.”

Today’s gospel is a test of faith. Jesus has been busy teaching his followers about the living bread.....that his body and blood are the heavenly food and drink of eternal life.....and the people are finding this very difficult to understand. So much so in fact, that the people are grumbling and fighting amongst themselves; they can’t comprehend the idea of spiritual food. They are repelled by the materialistic words and the literal sense of Jesus’ teaching. Jesus knew that many of them would not believe – he even knew that one of the 12 disciples closest to him would betray him – and his answer to the crowds was ‘this is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.’ This is a reference to what John states in his 1<sup>st</sup> letter, that those who confess Jesus as the Son of God are of God, and those who do not confess him are not of God. [pause] It is here in this passage from John’s gospel that Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is. The crowds have begun to thin out.....people are walking away..... some because they are angry and don’t understand what is happening and others because they see where this is heading.....they want to get out of the line of fire. Jesus notices that the crowds are thinning and asks his disciples if they too will leave him. Simon Peter provides a stunning answer. He says, “Why would we leave? Where would we go? We know that you have the words of eternal life, and we believe that you are the Holy One of God.”

No one is more envied than Peter – a simple fisherman chosen by the Son of God to become the ‘rock’ on which a new faith would be built. He is impetuous, thinking more with his heart than his head, and often gets into trouble because he rushes into things without considering what God might have to say. Peter is the common man or woman sitting in the pews this morning.....totally human with all its failings.....and yet, Jesus picks him for this important task. Even knowing that Jesus is the Messiah, Peter will deny him – not once but three times – when Jesus is on trial before the Sanhedrin. [pause] Yes, Peter was the rock – but even rocks break – crack – or show signs of wear under duress.

Judas on the other hand is viewed as a traitor – the worst kind of traitor – one who betrays the trust of a friend. History will always view Judas this way – but was he really the traitor we think? Jesus knew that Judas would betray him – God knew that Judas would betray his Son – and yet, some authors show Jesus and Judas sharing a deep friendship. One author in particular indicates that Judas warns Jesus of what is to come – makes provisions for the safety of the women and children

who are with them – and receives a blessing from Jesus before going out to betray him. Jesus knew God's plan – he knew that his death on the cross was the plan for the salvation of the world – and he knew that Judas must play his part in order for the sacrifice to take place. But, history will insist on painting Judas as traitor – not friend – as one whose dreams and ideals were shattered over the years – as one who had lost his faith; who no longer believed in God's promises.

There is a story that commentator, William Barclay, uses to illustrate the deterioration of Judas' faith. He says: There was once an artist who was painting the Last Supper. It was a great picture and took many years to complete. As a model for the face of Christ, he used a young man with a face of transcendent beauty and purity. Bit by bit the picture was filled in and one after another the disciples were painted. The day came when he needed a model for Judas whose face he had left for last. He went out and searched the lowest haunts of the city and the worst dens of vice he could find. At last, he found a man with a face depraved and vicious enough for the face of Judas. When the sittings were at an end, the man said to the artist: "You painted me before." "Surely not," said the artist. "O yes," said the man, "I sat for your Christ." The years had not been kind to this man and the deterioration was terrible to behold. We walk a fine line between good and evil, sanity and insanity, purity and depravation.....we shake our heads when we see those who suffer and think 'there, but for the grace of God, go I.' Time is the enemy. It is the greatest test of all things.....even faith.

So, if today's gospel is a test of faith as indicated, then let me ask you a question. What is faith? A simple definition would be that faith represents a body of beliefs and/or confidence in persons or things. Nothing is ever as simple as we would like to believe – Faith is much more complex than we could imagine. We often talk about faith as the belief in things known but unseen – in other words, we believe in events and people that we have never seen or heard based on the testimony of witnesses. The Bible is an excellent example of this type of faith – it takes the testimony of its authors as proof of their faith and equates this conviction with knowledge and truth. We believe the words found in the Bible – our faith is sustained by these words – but we – sitting here today - have no direct witness to support our knowledge – we believe but have not seen.

Faith is an ever evolving idea. As God's revelations to us through scripture become larger, so to must our faith grow and evolve. The Old Testament defines faith as resting, trusting, and hoping in the Lord, cleaving to him, waiting for him and making him our shield – our refuge in times of trouble. The Psalms speak of faith as unwavering trust in God's promises to protect and bless his servants. We are told over and over again to lay all things at the feet of God through Christ – that we should not rely on human assistance – and yet, God gives some of us the gifts of healing – doctors, nurses, surgeons, medics, etc.; gives others the gifts of service and protection – law Enforcement, Firefighters, and those who serve in our armed forces. Should we rely totally on human assistance – No – but, we shouldn't exclude them either. God wants us to lay our worries, cares, and burdens before him – but once we have done that through our prayers, God wants us to use the gifted men and women that he has provided for us. When we use our God-given gifts we become the hands and feet of God here on Earth. Faith in God doesn't exclude human assistance, it invites human assistance.

The New Testament shows Christ demanding that we trust him as the Messiah and author of our salvation. John's gospel is the most prolific example of this as he emphasizes that faith involves acknowledging Jesus as teacher, miracle worker, and God incarnate whose death on the cross is the atoning sacrifice for our sins – the means of our salvation – and the way to eternal life with

God. His epistles continue the theme, showing us that Jesus is the only means to a right relationship with God.

The tenets of our faith as Episcopalians can be found in the Book of Common Prayer beginning on page 845. The Creeds – both the Nicene and the Apostles – are statements of our faith – the basic tenets of our belief in God the Father; his Son, Jesus; and the Holy Spirit – the Trinitarian belief in the three faces of God. The back of our prayer book also contains earlier versions of the creeds such as the Creed of Athanasius, the Preface of the first Book of Common Prayer (1549), and the Articles of Religion – historical documents that you may wish to read and study. They are old – some may feel they are no longer relevant to today's society – but they are still the foundational beliefs – the tenets - of our faith.

How strong is your faith? If, as we have heard today, our faith is continually evolving as God's revelations to us become larger and more developed, then how can we deny the various changes taking place in our worship, our liturgy, and our church as a whole. Is it because, while our faith may be strong, we – like most humans – don't like change? We believe that the old ways were good enough for grandma and grandpa and they should be good enough for us today. We don't like to get outside of our comfort zone – we want what is familiar – not the unrest and upheaval that change brings with it. Is it because we see change as 'evil'? Do we believe that God doesn't want us to grow and change? And last but not least, if we are to grow and change as our faith evolves, then doesn't it follow that the church, our worship, our liturgy.....maybe even our basic beliefs might need to change and grow, too?

God doesn't want us to remain the same – to be stagnant, stick in the mud followers. He wants us to grow, to evolve and to become energetic ministers of his word, his sacraments, and to his people – not just some, but all of his people. The challenge is before us. We, the members of the Church of the Incarnation, are facing severe challenges – worship issues, maintenance issues, financial issues, and growth issues. Our faith is being tested – changes are necessary – some we will have a say in and others will come whether we want them to or not. Our survival depends on how strong our faith is and whether we can adapt to the changes coming. Time has been our enemy – we have buried our head in the sand for too long and denied the seriousness of small problems – problems which are now huge and deeply entrenched. Prayer, faith and a lot of hard work by all of us – not just the few active workers – ALL of us will be necessary to fix the problems that we are facing.

Faith in God.....faith in each other.....faith in prayer.....Faith is the bread of our life in Christ – the living bread of our survival. Amen.