

Commentary to the Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time: Faith

As the old commercial would say, "It's that most wonderful time of the year. The children are going back to school." The other day I was in a local office supply store and there was one of our families shopping for school supplies. Parents have purchased pens, pencils, notebooks, and backpacks for years. Now, however, there are some new items that parents have to buy: ipads, laptops, computers, flash drives, printers, etc. The computer has become such a huge part of American life that most of our young people cannot fathom how old folks like me could ever do a term paper using a library. For those of you who never heard of a library, that's an ancient building that used to contain books. In schools most libraries have been replaced by Media Centers, which, of course, consist in more computers. On the positive side, when I see the work that the young people are able to produce using computers, I am pleasantly surprised.



Where our reports were full of smudges and somewhat legible writing, their reports are neat, organized and easy to read. Where our grade school reports were usually verbatim copying of articles from the World Book Encyclopedia, their reports contain numerous references to all sorts of publications. The internet provides so much information that we can easily come to the conclusion that the answer to every question is out there, somewhere. You just need to know where to look. That is a fallacy. The answers to the most important questions, the fundamental questions of life, are not on the internet. They are not out there. They are in here. The answers to the fundamental questions of life can only be found in faith. If we are honest, we will recognize that this is hard to handle. We would like to find the answers to everything. But we can't. Only faith can point us in the direction of the answers we need. More than that, only faith can provide us with the questions we need to ask. Faith forces us to ask about that which is unseen, that which is spiritual. Today's second reading is about faith. It comes from the Letter to the Hebrews and uses Abraham as an example of what our faith must be like. Abraham is the Father of Faith.

This was not just because Abraham is the Patriarch of Israel, the leader of all those from whom the Jews are descended. Abraham is the Father of Faith because of all the figures of Hebrew Scripture,

Abraham's life gives the greatest example of the deepest meaning of faith. He was living in the fertile crescent, the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, rich in farming and pasturing land, when he heard the call of God to leave his ancestral home. Abraham trusted God to bring him to a place where God would start a new people. Abraham had complete faith that God would work things out. Abraham had been promised that his descendants would be as numerous as the sands of the seashore or stars of the sky. He had a child by a servant girl, Hagar, whom he named Ishmael, but he knew that Ishmael was not his true descendent. He needed a child by his wife Sarah. But Sarah was elderly and past child bearing years.

Abraham trusted that somehow God would work this out. He could not see how. He could not figure out how. But he knew that God would work it out. And when a child came, Isaac, the son of laughter, Abraham realized that this is the one promised. He had faith that God would be true to his promise, even when God demanded a terrible test of Abraham's faith. He was told to sacrifice Isaac. He finally had a son and was told to sacrifice him. He prepared to do as God told him. He trusted in God. Soren Kierkegaard would refer to this as Abraham's great leap of faith. The Letter to the Hebrews presents a profound definition of faith: Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. Faith is taking a step into the unknown and trusting in God.

Faith demands a way of thinking that is completely opposite the expectations of people of the computer age. Faith says that we cannot find the answers ourselves. We have to trust in God. For example, people come to my office for wedding preparation. I know that none of them will admit it, but I am certain than many do have a doubt. "How can I know that this is the right person? How can I know that I am doing the right thing?" To those who might be thinking about becoming engaged, let me remind you that when it comes to spiritual relationships, and marriage, true marriage, is a spiritual relationship, no one can ever know. People have to have faith. They need to trust God. When they see another person as their way of salvation, they have to recognize that it is God who brought them together. When we people of faith become ill, we go to the doctor. We do as we are told. We take the medication, treatments, etc. Still we realize that in the long run, our lives are in God's hands, not the doctor's. Live or die, we have faith that God will provide.

Faith is present when we listen to that voice within us that is our consciences. We follow this voice, trusting that as God found a way for Abraham to be the Father of Many Nations, He will find a way for us to confront and conquer the challenges of life. We do that which is moral, and we trust in God. It is easy for us to take the way of least resistance in every aspect of our lives. We can easily reject having the deep faith that the Letter to the Hebrews offers. But then we would be denying who we really are, People of God. We need God's help to live as People of Faith. We are all weak. Our prayer must be that of the man in Mark 9:24. He had asked Jesus to cure his son of what appears to have been epilepsy. Jesus asked him, "Do you believe," "I do believe, the man said, "but help my unbelief." Help those parts of me that don't believe. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. Today we pray for a deepening of our faith.

Fr. Joseph Pellegrino, SJ