

Living by Faith



El Greco, *Christ healing the blind*

Given by St. Josemaria on October 12, 1947.

You hear people saying sometimes that there are fewer miracles nowadays. Might it not rather be that there are fewer people living a life of faith? God cannot go back on his promise, 'Ask of me, and I will give you the nations for your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for your possession.' Our God is Truth itself, the very foundation of all that exists: nothing takes place independently of his almighty will.

'As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.' The Lord does not change. He does not need to go after things he might not have, for he is all motion, all beauty, all greatness. Today as always. 'The heavens will vanish like smoke, and the earth will wear out like a garment... but my salvation will last for ever and my justice will have no end.'

In Jesus Christ God has established a new and everlasting covenant with mankind. He has placed his almighty power at the service of our salvation. When his creatures lose confidence and are afraid through lack of faith, we hear once again the voice of Isaiah who speaks out in the name of the Lord: 'Is my hand too short to redeem? Have I not strength to save? With one threat I can dry the sea and turn rivers to desert; so that their fish shrivel

up for want of water and die of thirst. I clothe the heavens with darkness, and make sackcloth their covering.'

Faith is a supernatural virtue which disposes our intelligence to give assent to the truths of revelation, to say Yes to Christ, who has brought us full knowledge of the Blessed Trinity's plan for our salvation. 'In old days, God spoke to our fathers in many ways and by many means, through the prophets; now at last in these times, he has spoken to us through his Son, whom he has appointed heir of all things, through whom also he created this world of time; a Son who is the splendour of his glory and the figure of his substance; all things depend, for their support, on his word of power. Now, making atonement for our sins, he has taken his place on high, at the right hand of God's majesty.'

I would like Jesus himself to talk to us about faith, to give us lessons in faith. So let us open the New Testament and relive with him some of the events of his life. For he did not disdain to teach his disciples, showing them, little by little, how to give themselves wholeheartedly to carrying out the Will of his Father. He taught them both by words and by deeds.

Consider chapter nine of St John. 'And Jesus saw, as he passed on his way, a man who had been blind from birth. Whereupon his disciples asked him, Master, was this man guilty of sin, or was it his parents, that he should have been born blind?' These men, even though they were so close to Christ, could still think badly about that poor blind man. So do not be surprised if, as you go through life seeking to serve the Church, you also come across disciples of Our Lord behaving in a similar manner towards you or towards others. Don't let it worry you and, like the blind man, take no notice; just place yourselves wholeheartedly in Christ's hands. He does not accuse, he pardons. He does not condemn, he forgives. He is not cold and indifferent towards illness, but instead cures it with divine diligence.

Our Lord 'spat on the ground, and made clay with the spittle. Then he spread the clay on the man's eyes, and said to him, Go and wash in the pool of Siloe (a name that means, Sent). So he went and washed there, and came back with his sight restored.'

What an example of firm faith the blind man gives us! A living, operative faith. Do you behave like this when God commands, when so often you can't see, when your soul is worried and the light is gone? What power could the water possibly contain that when the blind man's eyes were moistened with it they were cured? Surely some mysterious eye salve, or a precious medicine made up in the laboratory of some wise alchemist, would have done better? But the man believed; he acted upon the command of God, and he returned with eyes full of light.

St Augustine commenting on this passage wrote: 'It seems appropriate that the Evangelist should have explained the meaning of the name of the pool saying that it meant, Sent. Now you know who has been sent. If Our Lord had not been sent to us, none of us would have been freed from sin.' We must have complete faith in the one who saves us, in this divine Doctor who was sent with the express purpose of curing us, and the more serious or hopeless our illness is the stronger our faith has to be.

We must learn to acquire the divine measure of things, never losing our supernatural outlook, and realising that Jesus makes use also of our weaknesses to reveal his glory. So, whenever your conscience feels the stirrings of self-love, of weariness, of discouragement, or the weight of your passions, you must react immediately and listen to the Master, without letting the sad truth about our lives frighten us, because as long as we live our personal failings will always be with us.

This is the way we Christians must travel. We have to cry out ceaselessly with a strong and humble faith, 'Lord, put not your trust in me. But I, I put my trust in you.' Then, as we sense in our hearts the love, the compassion, the tenderness of Christ's gaze upon us, for he never abandons us, we shall come to understand the full meaning of those words of St Paul, *virtus in infirmitate perficitur*. If we have faith in Our Lord, in spite of our failings or, rather, with our failings — we shall be faithful to our Father, God; his divine power will shine forth in us, sustaining us in our weakness.

If we turn now to St Mark we will find he tells us about another blind man being cured. As Jesus 'was leaving Jericho, with his disciples and a great multitude, Bartimaeus, the blind man, Timaeus' son, was sitting there by the wayside, begging'. Hearing the commotion the crowd was making, the blind man asked, 'What is happening?' They told him, 'It is Jesus of Nazareth.' At this his soul was so fired with faith in Christ that he cried out, 'Jesus, son of David, have pity on me.'

Don't you too feel the same urge to cry out? You who also are waiting at the side of the way, of this highway of life that is so very short? You who need more light, you who need more grace to make up your mind to seek holiness? Don't you feel an urgent need to cry out, 'Jesus, son of David, have pity on me?' What a beautiful aspiration for you to repeat again and again!

I recommend you to meditate slowly on the events preceding the miracle, to help you keep this fundamental idea clearly engraved upon your minds: what a world of difference there is between the merciful Heart of Jesus and our own poor hearts! This thought will help you at all times, and especially in the hour of trial and temptation, and also when the time comes to be generous in the little duties you have, or in moments when heroism is called for.

'Many of them rebuked him, telling him to be silent. As people have done to you, when you sensed that Jesus was passing your way. Your heart beat faster and you too began to cry out, prompted by an intimate longing. Then your friends, the need to do the done thing, the easy life, your surroundings, all conspired to tell you: 'Keep quiet, don't cry out. Who are you to be calling Jesus? Don't bother him.'

But poor Bartimaeus would not listen to them. He cried out all the more: 'Son of David, have pity on me.' Our Lord, who had heard him right from the beginning, let him persevere in his prayer. He does the same with you. Jesus hears our cries from the very first, but he waits. He wants us to be convinced that we need him. He wants us to beseech him, to persist, like the blind man waiting by the road from Jericho. 'Let us imitate him. Even if God does not immediately give us what we ask, even if many people try to put us off our prayers, let us still go on praying.'

'And Jesus stopped, and told them to call him.' Some of the better people in the crowd turned to the blind man and said, 'Take heart. Rise up, he is calling you.' Here you have

the Christian vocation! But God does not call only once. Bear in mind that Our Lord is seeking us at every moment: get up, he tells us, put aside your indolence, your easy life, your petty selfishness, your silly little problems. Get up from the ground, where you are lying prostrate and shapeless. Acquire height, weight and volume, and a supernatural outlook.

'Whereupon the man threw away his cloak and leapt to his feet, and so came to him.' He threw aside his cloak! I don't know if you have ever lived through a war, but many years ago I had occasion to visit a battlefield shortly after an engagement. There, strewn all over the ground, were greatcoats, water bottles, haversacks stuffed with family souvenirs, letters, photographs of loved ones... which belonged, moreover, not to the vanquished, but to the victors! All these items had become superfluous in the bid to race forward and leap over the enemy defences. Just as happened to Bartimaeus, as he raced towards Christ.

Never forget that Christ cannot be reached without sacrifice. We have to get rid of everything that gets in the way: greatcoat, haversack, water bottle. You have to do the same in this battle for the glory of God, in this struggle of love and peace by which we are trying to spread Christ's kingdom. In order to serve the Church, the Pope and all souls, you must be ready to give up everything superfluous, to be left without a cloak to shelter you from the bitter cold of night, without your much loved family souvenirs, without water to refresh you. This is the lesson taught us by faith and love. This is the way that we must love Christ.

And now begins a dialogue with God, a marvellous dialogue that moves us and sets our hearts on fire, for you and I are now Bartimaeus. Christ, who is God, begins to speak and asks, *Quid tibi vis faciam?* 'What do you want me to do for you?' The blind man answers, 'Lord, that I may see.' How utterly logical! How about yourself, can you really see? Haven't you too experienced at times what happened to the blind man of Jericho? I can never forget how, when meditating on this passage many years back, and realising that Jesus was expecting something of me, though I myself did not know what it was, I made up my own aspirations: 'Lord, what is it you want? What are you asking of me?' I had a feeling that he wanted me to take on something new and the cry *Rabboni, ut videam*, 'Master, that I may see,' moved me to beseech Christ again and again, 'Lord, whatever it is that you wish, let it be done.'

Pray with me now to Our Lord: *doce me facere voluntatem tuam, quia Deus meus es tu*, 'teach me to do your will, for you are my God'. In short, our lips should express a true desire on our part to correspond effectively to our Creator's promptings, striving to follow out his plans with unshakeable faith, being fully convinced that he cannot fail us.

If we love God's Will in this way, we shall come to understand that the value of our faith lies not only in how clearly we can express it, but also in our determination to defend it by our deeds, and we shall act accordingly.

But let us go back to the scene outside Jericho. It is now to you that Christ is speaking. He asks you, 'What is it you want of me?' 'That I may see, Lord, that I may see.' Then Jesus answers, 'Away home with you. Your faith has brought you recovery. And all at once he recovered his sight and followed Jesus on his way.' Following Jesus on his way. You have understood what Our Lord was asking from you and you have decided to accompany him on his way. You are trying to walk in his footsteps, to clothe yourself in Christ's clothing, to be Christ himself: well, your faith, your faith in the light Our Lord is giving you, must be

both operative and full of sacrifice. Don't fool yourself. Don't think you are going to find new ways. The faith he demands of us is as I have said. We must keep in step with him, working generously and at the same time uprooting and getting rid of everything that gets in the way.

Now it is St Matthew who tells us about a most touching episode. 'And behold a woman who for twelve years had been troubled with an issue of blood, came up behind him and touched the hem of his cloak.' What great humility she shows! 'She said to herself, "If only I can touch the hem of his garment, I shall be healed."' There are always sick people who, like Bartimaeus, pray with great faith and have no qualms about confessing their faith at the top of their voices. But notice how, among those whom Christ encounters, no two souls are alike. This woman, too, has great faith, but she does not cry aloud; she draws near to Jesus without anyone even noticing. For her it is enough just to touch his garment, because she is quite certain she will be cured. No sooner has she done so than Our Lord turns round and looks at her. He already knows what is going on in the depths of her heart and has seen how sure she is: 'Have no fear, my daughter, your faith has saved you.'

'She delicately touched the hem of his garment. She came forward with faith. She believed, and she knew she had been cured... We too, if we want to be saved, should touch Christ's garment with faith.' Do you see now how our faith must be? It must be humble. Who are you, and who am I, to deserve to be called in this way by Christ? Who are we, to be so close to him? As with that poor woman in the crowd, he has given us an opportunity. And not just to touch his garment a little, to feel for a moment the fringe, the hem of his cloak. We actually have Christ himself. He gives himself to us totally, with his Body, his Blood, his Soul and his Divinity. We eat him each day. We speak to him intimately as one does to a father, as one speaks to Love itself. And all this is true. It is no fantasy.

Let us try to become more humble. For only a truly humble faith will allow us to see things from a supernatural point of view. We have no other alternative. There are only two possible ways of living on this earth: either we live a supernatural life, or else an animal life. And you and I can only live the life of God, a supernatural life. 'For what does it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and suffers the loss of his own soul?' What use to man are all the things of the earth, all that our intelligence and will can aspire to? What is the point of all that, if it is all to come to an end and sink out of sight; if all the riches of this world are mere theatre props and scenery, and if after all this there is eternity for ever, and ever, and ever?

The phrase 'for ever' made St Teresa of Avila great. One day, as a child, she set out from Avila with her brother Rodrigo through the Adaja gate. As they left behind the city walls, intending to reach the land of the Moors where they could be beheaded for love of Christ, she kept whispering to her brother, who was beginning to get tired, 'for ever, for ever, for ever'.

Men lie when they say 'for ever' about things on earth. The only true, totally true, 'for ever' is that which we say with reference to God. This is how you ought to live your life, with a faith that will help you to taste the honey, the sweetness of heaven whenever you think about eternal life which is indeed 'for ever'.

Let us go back to the Gospels and take a look at what St Matthew tells us in chapter twenty-one. He described how Jesus 'returning to the city was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the wayside he went up to it.' How wonderful, Lord, to see you hungry! To see you thirsty, too, by the well of Sichar! I contemplate you who are perfectus Deus, perfectus homo, truly God, yet truly man, with flesh like my flesh. 'He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,' so that I should never have the slightest doubt that he understands me and loves me.

'He was hungry.' Whenever we get tired — in our work, in our studies, in our apostolic endeavours — when our horizon is darkened by lowering clouds, then let us turn our eyes to Jesus, to Jesus who is so good, and who also gets tired; to Jesus who is hungry and suffers thirst. Lord, how well you make yourself understood! How lovable you are! You show us that you are just like us, in everything but sin, so that we can feel utterly sure that, together with you, we can conquer all our evil inclinations, all our faults. For neither weariness nor hunger matter, nor thirst, nor tears... since Christ also grew weary, knew hunger, was thirsty, and wept. What is important is that we struggle to fulfil the will of our heavenly Father, battling away good-heartedly, for Our Lord is always at our side.

Jesus approaches the fig tree: he approaches you, he approaches me. Jesus hungers, he thirsts for souls. On the Cross he cried out Sitio!, 'I thirst'. He thirsts for us, for our love, for our souls and for all the souls we ought to be bringing to him, along the way of the Cross which is the way to immortality and heavenly glory.

He reached the fig tree 'and found nothing but leaves on it'. How deplorable. Does the same thing happen to us? Is the sad fact that we are lacking in faith, in dynamism in our humility? Have we no sacrifices, no good works to show? Is our Christianity just a facade, with nothing real behind it? This would be terrible, because Jesus goes on to command, 'Let no fruit ever grow on you hereafter. Whereupon the fig tree withered away.' This Gospel passage makes us feel sorry, yet at the same time encourages us to strengthen our faith, to live by faith, so that we may always be ready to yield fruit to Our Lord.

Let us not deceive ourselves: Our Lord does not depend in any way on the human results of our efforts. Our most ambitious projects are, for him, but child's play. What he wants are souls, he wants love. He wants all men to come to him, to enjoy his Kingdom for ever. We have to work a lot on this earth and we must do our work well, since it is our daily tasks that we have to sanctify. But let us never forget to do everything for his sake. If we were to do it for ourselves, out of pride, we would produce nothing but leaves, and no matter how luxuriant they were, neither God nor our fellow men would find any good in them.

When they saw the tree had withered 'his disciples were amazed, saying "How did it wither so suddenly?"' The first twelve, who had seen Christ work so many miracles, were completely astonished once again. Their faith was not yet a burning faith, so Our Lord went on to assure them, 'I promise you, if you have faith, and do not hesitate, you will be able to do more than I have done over the fig tree. If you say to this mountain, "Remove and be cast into the sea", it will come about.' Christ lays down one condition: we must live by faith; then we will be able to move mountains. And so many things need moving... in the world, but, first of all, in our own hearts. So many obstacles placed in the way of grace! We have to have faith, therefore: faith and works, faith and sacrifice, faith and humility. For faith makes us all powerful: 'If you will only believe, every gift you ask for in your prayer will be granted.'

The man of faith sees the things of this life in their proper perspective. He knows that our stay on earth is, to use a phrase of St Teresa, 'a bad night in a bad inn'. He becomes convinced once again that our time on earth is a time to work and to struggle, a time to purify ourselves in order to wipe out the debt we owe to God's justice for our sins. He knows too that worldly possessions are but a means, and he uses them generously, heroically.

Faith is not only a virtue to be preached. Above all it is to be practised. Often, perhaps, we just don't have the strength. If this happens (once more we go to the Gospels) let us do as the father of the lunatic boy did. He very much wanted his son to be saved; he hoped Christ would cure him, but he could not bring himself to believe that such happiness was possible. Jesus, who always asks us to have faith and who knows at the same time what is troubling the man's soul, helps him saying: 'If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes.' Everything is possible, we are all powerful! But only if we have faith. The man feels his faith wavering and he is afraid that his lack of trust will prevent his son from being cured. He weeps. Don't be ashamed of tears like these, for they are the fruit of our love of God, of contrite prayer, of true humility. 'Whereupon the father of the boy cried aloud, with tears, Lord, I do believe. Help my unbelief.'

We too now, after this time of meditation, can speak the same words to him: 'Lord, I do believe! I have been brought up to believe in you. I have decided to follow you closely. Repeatedly during my life I have implored your mercy. And repeatedly too I have thought it impossible that you could perform such marvels in the hearts of your children. Lord, I do believe, but help me to believe more and better!'

Let us address this same plea to Our Lady, Mother of God and our Mother, and Teacher of faith: 'Blessed art thou for thy believing; the message that was brought to thee from the Lord shall have fulfilment.'