

28. January 2023

The shining light of faith

Heb 11:1-2.8-19

Only faith can guarantee the blessings that we hope for, or prove the existence of realities that are unseen. It is for their faith that our ancestors are acknowledged. It was by faith that Abraham obeyed the call to set out for a country that was the inheritance given to him and his descendants, and that he set out without knowing where he was going. By faith he sojourned in the Promised Land as though it were not his, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. He looked forward to the well-founded city, designed and built by God. It was equally by faith that Sarah, in spite of being past the age, was made able to conceive, because she believed that he who had made the promise was faithful to it. Because of this, there came from one man, and one who already had the mark of death on him, descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the grains of sand on the seashore which cannot be counted. All these died in faith, before receiving any of the things that had been promised, but they saw them in the far distance and welcomed them, recognising that they were only strangers and nomads on earth. People who use such terms about themselves make it quite plain that they are in search of a homeland. If they had meant the country they came from, they would have had the opportunity to return to it; but in fact they were longing for a better homeland, their heavenly homeland. That is why God is not ashamed to be called their God, since he has founded the city for them. It was by faith that Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He offered to sacrifice his only son even though he had yet to receive what had been promised, and he had been told: Isaac is the one through whom your name will be carried on. He was confident that God had the power even to raise the dead; and so, figuratively speaking, he was given back Isaac from the dead.

We all know those words of the Lord that faith can move mountains (cf. Mt 17,20). Again and again the Gospel speaks to us about faith (cf. e.g. Mk 5,34), and sometimes it also draws our attention to the lack of faith (cf. e.g. Mt 16,8), which stands in the way and does not allow God to unfold all His providence and love for us, or prevents Him from manifesting Himself through miracles.

On the other hand, we have testimonies of strong faith, through which God glorifies Himself.

If even the disciples, who walked so close to Jesus, asked Him to increase their faith (cf. Lk 17:5), then surely it is not always so natural for us to believe either. I am not referring here to faith in the truth of the Gospel in general, but to its concrete application in the respective situations of life; to a firm trust in the presence and help of God; to the certainty that He will bring all things to a successful conclusion.

The first sentence of today's reading gives us a key to understanding why it is sometimes difficult for us to believe: *"Only faith can guarantee the blessings that we hope for, or prove the existence of realities that are unseen."*

It is not always easy for us not to give first place to the securities offered to us by the visible and tangible world. It is easy to talk about being "realistic" and thus to believe that we have achieved a vision that can be trusted. One regulates and plans all things for oneself and regards reason as the "guiding star". But then we are moving above all in the field of the visible world. And when questions arise that touch on the invisible world and are not within the realm of the certain and calculable, the usual logic of explanation vanishes and we are quite disoriented.

This is why another "guiding star" is needed: it is a faith-based perspective, in which the understanding takes its rightful place, aware that it needs to be enlightened by faith. Faith, as a theological virtue, connects us directly with God and also begins to reveal the invisible world to us.

Faith is the clearest light in this world, which can only be surpassed in eternity by the beatific vision of God. Although St. Paul says that now, as long as our earthly life lasts, *"we see only reflections in a mirror, mere riddles"* (1 Cor 13:12), faith is still a shining light that shines in the darkness.

Let us look at Abraham: *"It was by faith that Abraham obeyed the call to set out for a country that was the inheritance given to him and his descendants, and that he set out without knowing where he was going."*

We see that here reason reaches its limits; unless it is a reason enlightened by faith, which knows that, if God asks for something, He also takes care to provide all that is necessary, because He is our loving Father, even if we cannot yet understand it.

Through faith, God can concretely realise His plans of salvation with us. Faith is, so to speak, the bridge that God chooses to make known to us the invisible world, His presence, His Being, His action... It is God Himself who awakens faith in us, and with every act of faith that we make, He can manifest His presence and His action even more concretely. In this way, it becomes natural for us to live and act in faith.

Abraham followed God's call, because he believed and trusted in Him, even to the point of being ready to sacrifice his own son - an act that can make us shudder. And let us also remember St Agnes, whom we got to know better through the audio-novel of Harpa Dei. Even at the moment of being taken to the brothel, she clung to God in faith and He preserved her from disgrace.

So we can be sure *"of what we hope for"* and convinced *"of what we do not see"*, because we trust in God and His goodness. It is not a matter of being unrealistic dreamers, nor of fulfilling our own illusions and desires, pretending that God will fulfil them for us; but it is a believing realism.

If we know that God is our loving Father, we can trust Him in everything. This is then a "holy realism", which is also accessible to our reason. Thus, we learn to understand our life from God's perspective and to perceive His guidance, which will become more and more natural to us as our faith grows, and will embrace both the visible and the invisible world.

This journey of faith demands that we ground our whole life in God; that He be our security, far beyond our passing, supposedly earthly securities. Faith lives from God, and this is most comforting. The securities that we ourselves, fearfully and sometimes tensely, build up for our lives, fade away. Instead, a great confidence arises, which can become as invincible as that of Abraham or our Saint Agnes. Precisely in these apocalyptic times we should ask for such a faith. In this way, we will stand firm in the certainty that the Lord brings all things to a successful conclusion, even if we ourselves are not yet able to see it.