

Sermon for 8 August 2010
Pentecost 11; Proper 14, Year C

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Going two weeks without preaching, I've discovered, can make one's first sermon after vacation a little dense, so please bear with me. I guess all the theology gets bottled up. I'd like to begin this morning's sermon with a philosophical question: "How do we know what we know?" At the bottom of every controversial issue since the enlightenment is this question, a question which has spawned a whole school of inquiry known as "epistemology". Most secular epistemologists will answer that there are two means by which we come to know what we know: reason and observation. Some truths do not require any observation for us to know their truth, for example "2+2 is 4" or "all bachelors are unmarried". You don't need to take a sample of bachelors and confirm that they are all

unmarried to know the truth of this proposition. All you need is logic. Other propositions require the accumulation of data before we can claim to know their truth or falsehood. If we want to claim to know something about the migratory patterns of swallows or about who won the Battle of Hastings or whatever, we've either got to do some research, collect some data, or trust that biologists or historians or whomever have figured out the truth of the matter.

Now, for some centuries most secular philosophers will have said that these two methods—reason and observation—and only these two methods give us the means of knowing anything. For this reason, Christianity is reckoned to be incompatible with modernity. Much ink has been spilled to combat this perception, but instead of making that argument, which others have made more persuasively than I could do in a ten minute sermon, I'd like to suggest that the charisma of Christianity today is

found in the fact that it does so radically diverge from our modern assumptions. In a world where reason and science are lifted up as man's greatest achievement, Christianity claims that simple faith can move mountains. In a society where human ingenuity is reckoned unstoppable, Christianity claims that there are truths, indeed the most important truths, that we cannot know with our heads, but must accept with our hearts.

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews uses a couple of words which transform our understanding of faith: assurance and conviction. Faith is not just about believing stuff; faith is about receiving an *assurance* that our greatest hopes will come to pass. Faith is not some tepid assent to facts that we choose to believe because we might as well; faith is about engendering *conviction*- a certainty about God's promise which changes how we live our lives.

This is all very abstract, so let us take Abraham as our example. Abraham was not a captive to wishful thinking. His initial state was fear. God begins his conversations with Abraham in today's Old Testament lesson, by bidding him "fear not", yet Abraham remains fearful. He desires what every man of his era desired: a legacy in the form of descendants, and he is justifiably afraid that it will never happen. Observation and reason have taught him that his hope was empty. No man of his age, with a wife apparently incapable of conceiving, could have hope for children.

Yet, God gives Abraham an assurance that the promise will be kept, and he immediately believes. Assurance only means something if the one giving it is in a relationship with the one receiving it. Abraham's relationship with God was strong, and so the assurance was received. Despite all evidence pointing to the impossibility of God keeping the

promise, Abraham's relationship with God was strong enough to elicit trust.

Now Abraham's response was not just any kind of trust. It was what the author of Hebrews called conviction. Ordinary trust doesn't require anything of the beneficiary save confidence in the trustee. Conviction, on the other hand, requires action. Conviction changes one's whole outlook and approach. Immediately after this morning's reading, Abraham makes sacrifice to God. Throughout the next several chapters he will obey God's commands even when he doesn't understand the point, most significantly in the binding of Isaac after Sarah does give birth. Ultimately, it is through this kind of conviction, the principle component of faith, by which God himself is proved faithful.

This is good news for us, but it is also a great challenge. It is good news because it means that we can be assured of things unseen if we maintain our relationship with God. We can come to

a place of profound confidence simply by maintaining that bond, as did Abraham and all the great heroes of our faith. It is, however, a challenge, because it means that something is required of us, namely conviction. The Christian life isn't all about believing certain facts despite the lack of evidence, as important as believing those facts might be. It is about letting those truths change us. It is about bearing the good fruits of virtue: temperance and justice and mercy and love. Just as Abraham's faith proved God faithful, so will our faith if we live with conviction. Just like Abraham, and just like all the saints, we can not only believe but *know*, know more sincerely and more powerfully than we can know the truths of reason and science, that God has prepared for us "a better country... a heavenly one." When we live in the great joy of that knowledge, our lives will be changed, will be transformed into

sacrifices even more pleasing to God than was
Abraham's.

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Amen.