

## F A I T H

by Geoffrey R. Usher

(From an Address given in the Sydney Unitarian Church,

Sunday 20 AUG, 1978).

"Our fathers' faith, we'll sing of  
thee, Dear faith, which still we  
cherish: Nor may their children's  
children see

That faith decay and perish."

O.W. Chadwick and others)

The word "faith" occurs 18 times in Chadwick's hymn (Number 236 in "Hymns of Worship Revised"), and far more often in the Bible, but what does it mean? It is a word which is frequently mis-used and misunderstood, and it is the cause of much confusion in religion and life, particularly in Biblical interpretation.

"Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans U, 1).

"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God." (Ephesians II, 8).

"But without faith it is impossible to please Him."  
(Hebrews XI,6)

But what does "faith" mean? I believe that all too often it is used for, or confused with, the word "belief". Although belief is a pre-requisite for faith, to believe something and to have faith in something involve quite different approaches to it.

If we consider belief as usually a passive, rather intellectual thing, a result of considering the arguments pro and con, then faith is the active, practical result of belief, the putting into practice of what one believes to be right; it is this distinction which is expressed in the axiomatic "Actions speak louder than words".

Faith in God is not simply a dependence on God's will, that he should do what he wants with us. We are not wooden puppets, lifeless unless jerked into motion by strings, controlled and manipulated at will by some powerful external being. Sometimes the expression of prayers might seem to imply this, and there is no reason why we should deny God's omnipotence. But we are rational beings; our muscles are directed by impulses relayed through our own nervous systems from our own brains, and not by the directions of some master puppeteer in the sky.

To place our faith in God is not to kneel before him, heads bowed, in a kind of ineffectual submissiveness. It is rather to re-assert our belief in the all-encompassing goodness of our Creator, and the basic, inherent goodness in Man and this world. By placing

to him, if necessary, for inspiration and courage, and always striving in an unselfish way to improve the lot of our neighbour.

From such a faith in God the other kinds of faith will flow easily and naturally: faith in Man, in Self, in beauty, trust, and virtue.

Faith in Man is much the same as faith in God. It implies a constant and unswerving belief in the fundamental goodness of Mankind, in spite of all the examples of criminal, dishonest or selfish behaviour which surround us. I do not advocate that we must view this world through rose-tinted glasses; nor can we fall back passively to the "God is good" line of defence. But it is difficult to believe that there exists a person of whom it can be said "He is utterly and irrevocably bad, without any redeeming qualities of goodness, love or beauty in his whole nature".

The greatest single tragedy in this world is the failure by every society, and by the smaller groups within society, to recognize the unpleasant or the evil within itself and to do something about it immediately, decisively, and with love. Could any tyrant have come to power if he had been recognized in time, by enough people, for what he was? Blindness, perhaps, is as shameful as inactivity.

The man in the street, I know, can do little about such major problems. He cannot, singlehanded, feed the starving millions or reconcile the warring nations. These must be primarily the tasks of the governments who represent, and are elected by, the ordinary man. But the ordinary man can, and must, demonstrate his anxiety that something be done, for his faith in Man and the World should encompass every human being, known or unknown, and it should not let him stand idly by while others suffer.

You and I can demonstrate this faith in all our dealings with our fellows. It is our responsibility to place the virtues of honesty, integrity and love, guided and strengthened by conscience, before the goals of profit, fame and reputation. These latter are very pleasant, but they are hollow, bitter-sweet rewards if they are gained by fraudulent means. A favourable reputation can be a very brief pleasure, and may be completely reversed without its owner giving any apparent cause.

One man may be completely honest and sincere, poor but steadfast, and yet suffer the burden of ill-fame. Another may be dishonest and insincere, building up his fortune and fame on a foundation of deceit and fickle acquaintance, and yet enjoy the temporal salve of a favourable reputation. Many may think the latter to be the happier, but is he? Surely the former, if he accepts reputation at its true value, will be the happier, because he knows at all times that he is guided by truth, conscience and the dictates of love, and not by the baser motives of greed and pride, liberally spiced with emptiness.

"For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"  
(Mark VIII, 6)

Beauty and truth are eternal, and are bulwarks upon which to base one's life of goodness and love. They are an essential part of the nature of God and his world, and, paradoxically, they are an

birth, because of their parents' example and their environment. Others may come to learn it at a later stage, perhaps again by example and environment. Still others may have to take a positive step, to recognize their own failings and deliberately turn their backs on them for a better way of life. This sort of "act of faith" is sometimes a sudden, rather dramatic occurrence, coming after some personal crisis, or it may be a slower, steadier process, requiring a long and perhaps difficult battle of one's will against ingrained habits and prejudices.

The path is not important, and some are luckier than others, but however the individual attains his faith he will feel better for it: better in himself, because he knows that his goals and his guideposts are now those that make for inner peace.

" 'Tis'faith in God, 'tis faith in  
man, 'Tis faith in truth and  
beauty,  
In freedom's might, and reason's  
right, And all-controlling duty.