

26th July 2020
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7th after Pentecost

To believe is an act of free will. Believe it or not, we choose our beliefs. Yes, in this you can freely decide whether to believe me or not. Even if you thought it was your own pre-formed character that has determined *what* you believe, yet you still have free will. For such freedom is not just random choices, made without reason. Because free will, if it is to mean anything at all, must mean that, unconstrained, we can be true to our own character in what we choose to believe.

These two blind men in today's gospel show an admirable faith. They have chosen to believe that Our Lord can give them the gift of physical sight. At first, of course, they cannot even see that He is there, amongst them; told by others, no doubt, that Jesus of Nazareth is passing on from there; *there* meaning, the house where Our Lord had just raised Jairus' daughter from the dead.

So, this really is *blind faith* in the literal sense. They follow Him, sightless, drawn along by the crowd until He arrives where He is living, in the house at Capernaum (Matt.9:1). And once again, St Matthew presents us with *two* blind men, where the other evangelists would be quite content with only one; just as he gives us *two* demons (Matt.8:28f) and even *two* beasts of burden in the Triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matt.21:2f). Like Charles Dickens' description of Wackford Squeers, in *Nicholas Nickelby*, '*a man possessed of only one eye, when the popular prejudice runs to two,*' so St Matthew follows the Jewish convention of two witnesses being needed to confirm any testimony.

But these two, who can bear witness to nothing through their own eyes; for whom seeing is *not* believing, choose to believe that Jesus can make them whole. And like little, innocent children, blurting out their observations in front of the embarrassed adults, they call after Him, ignoring the political sensitivities: "*Have mercy on us, Son of David.*" We might almost have heard the gasp of the crowd as they are dragged into the house with Jesus and the door is shut. For they have just confessed their faith that He is the Messiah. And why would

they not believe that, if he can raise the dead, He can certainly give sight to the blind; it would not be hard to choose to believe such a thing.

And so, they encounter the secret Messiah and are healed. Although sternly warned to keep the secret, they prove incapable of this. For as St John says, He came to His own and His own knew Him not. Yet the Word of God dwelt among us and we beheld His glory: how could such a secret be hidden. And we might think it strange that the Christ should wish to hide his identity - who He truly is. But here we see the Wisdom of God, for *if* it is only for the sake of the politics that He is the Son of David, then you may as well dismiss His life, write off his importance as just another rebel against the Empire; another failed troublemaker in the annals of Roman History. But something and someone greater than just the politics is here, and He will be fully revealed in God's time. Indeed, adored to the shepherds at Bethlehem, worshipped by the Magi, revealed at the Jordan, realised by Peter at Caesarea Philipi, acknowledged at His entry in Jerusalem: but only *fully* made known after His death and Resurrection.

Then, those who chose to believe in Him bring another demoniac, one crazed individual, driven so mad by exposure to fallen angels, that he had withdrawn into himself and no longer spoke. Make no mistake about it: it is those who choose to be misguided, that leave the protection of God's holiness, consorting with the spirit of this world and darker ones beyond, who suffer such oppression from the demonic. Yet when this one, too, is cured, when he is exorcised and liberated, how easy would he find it not to publish the secret abroad, that the Holy One was among them?

Contrast all this with the immediate response of what St Andrew of Crete calls in his Lenten Great Canon, *the pharisee mind*. They too, for their own reasons, decide not to believe in Him. From their point of view, why should they? Jesus's teaching contradicted their own interpretation of what constituted true piety, pointing out their hypocrisy, as when He disputed with them over offerings made in the temple. The way in which He put the commandments into practice scandalised them, such as the healings He did on the Sabbath. To their mind He could only cast out demons by the Prince of Demons.

But this, as is pointed out elsewhere, is the ultimate, unforgivable blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. With such perverse explanations of His power they can excuse themselves from having to believe in Him. But it is a facile, peevish response, childish even, for those of Christ's opponents who willed, who chose, never to be satisfied.

The prophet Isaiah, foreseeing the Messianic times, says, '*The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall hear*'. [Is.35:5] Even if the prophet was only writing in symbolic language, here, the actual signs made very clear what was happening and who this was: restoring the blind, the deaf, the lame; cleansing lepers and forgiving sins; He has even raised the dead, and *still* they have chosen not to accept Him. But in suggesting that He was casting our demons by the ruler of demons, they are also guilty of illogicality; their reasoning makes no sense, even for the worldly people they are. Is Satan fractured in his personality; is he divided against himself? After all the whole demonic project is to destroy our life through temptations!

Thus, irony of ironies, they become blind in a way that does not allow them to see; in a worse condition than those whom Jesus had just healed. For in their spiritual blindness, unable to see who is standing before them, they have chosen the way of the foolish, as the Psalmist says, '*The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, they are abominable in their habits... The Lord stooped down from heaven to look upon the sons of men, to see if there were any who understood or sought God. All turned aside and were altogether corrupted. There was not even one doing good, no, not one.*' [Ps.13:1-3]

Like all those whom the Saviour healed, restored, absolved, and raised up, *we too* have chosen to put our faith in Him. But more than that: when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the apostles at Pentecost, the Church, the synaxis of the faithful, was made, consecrated, sanctified, ordained, unified and commissioned: the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, led by Holy Tradition, Orthodox in the mind of Christ. The whole ministry of Christ-God in His incarnation has now been handed down to us, calling all to repentance through the preaching of the gospel. And those who blasphemed the workings of

the Holy Spirit in Christ's days in Palestine still have their successors today, calling profane what is sacred, denying the Body of Christ, whether by denial, indifference, following heresies or even persecutions.

So it is with us, as Paul tells us in the Apostolos this morning. Whether we be Jews or Gentiles, we were all under the Law, for the Law cast Sin into sharp focus, revealing what was, and what was not, the will of God. But we are no longer children and slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe, like Christ's opponents, enclosed in their own choices; a choice to go one's own way, a choice as old as Adam. But now, Paul tells us, the time has fully come for those who are mature in Christ, whom God sent to redeem those who were under the Law, that we too might be adopted in His kingdom.