

John chapter 6: 35, 41-51 Belief Sermon by Archdeacon Jane Mainwaring

Jesus said, 'Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life'.

There have been many times when I have doubted. There have been times when I have wondered whether I am deluded, whether I have lost my faith, whether I have given my whole life to something that is a fairy tale.

There have been times when I've witnessed immeasurable suffering and struggled to square this with belief in a loving, powerful God.

But even in my greatest periods of doubt, the one thing which has kept me hanging in there – sometimes just by my finger tips – is that I cannot believe that this is it.

Even when I have had periods when I couldn't tell you precisely what I did believe, the thought that we go through life – we die – and that is it – is such a frightening and hopeless thought to me that I almost have no choice but to believe.

In these times I am reminded of the man we're told about in Mark's gospel chapter 9, who brought his son to Jesus to be cured. We know nothing about the man but we know his son was ill. Mark describes the illness as the child being possessed by an impure spirit – we may now read the account and feel that much of what is described may suggest the child was having a seizure.

The man had brought his son to Jesus' disciples but they hadn't been able to cure him, and the disciples ended up in an argument with the Jewish teachers of the law.

I doubt the man was particularly concerned about the argument – he would just have wanted his son cured.

He gets into a conversation with Jesus about his son and says to Jesus, 'if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us'.

Jesus replies 'If you can?', 'Everything is possible for one who believes'.

Mark tells us,

'Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief"'.

In this man's moment of desperation, having lived with his son's illness for so long, having sought help from the disciples, and not succeeded, his cry is from deep within – a cry of belief without understanding – a cry of belief that was hanging on by his finger tips.

We're told by Mark, that Jesus cured the man's son.

The boy's father didn't understand about Jesus – he didn't understand about what Jesus was about to do when he gave up his life on the cross – but something at his core, at the deepest place within him told him to believe. And out of that core belief came healing – came wholeness – came an answer from God.

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What does it mean to believe?

What level of belief do we have to get to in order to receive eternal life?

Do we need to get to the stage when we have read the Bible from cover to cover?

Do we have to get to the point where we pray in the morning, at midday and in the evening without a single struggle?

Do we need to get to the point where we can argue the doctrine of the Trinity?

Do we need to get to the point where we believe and never doubt?

Do we need to accept all that life throws at us without ever getting angry or frustrated with our lot?

No – we are just told to believe – believe from the core of our being – believe from a place of desperation – believe from a place of not understanding – believe because it makes sense – believe because it doesn't make sense but our gut tells us to - believe and ask for help in our unbelief – to cry to God, as the man did - 'I believe, help me overcome my unbelief'.

Jesus just tell us to believe.

If we can believe, even if it's through hanging on by our finger tips, everything else can flow from there. If we cry out from our places of belief – however tentative, however fragile – we invite God to take us on a journey of discovery, on a journey of belief where we no longer hang on by our finger tips, but where we place our hand firmly in God's hand.

Jesus asks us just to believe.

If you feel like you believe but that that belief, for whatever reason, is hanging on by your finger tips, I invite you to pray the same prayer that the man did when he brought his son to Jesus,

'I believe, help me overcome my unbelief'.

If you believe but don't understand why, then I invite you to pray 'I believe, help me in overcome unbelief'.

If you believe but your faith has been shaken or challenged, I invite you to pray 'I believe, help me overcome my unbelief'.

If you feel your faith is rock solid, I invite you still to pray, 'I believe, help me overcome my unbelief'.

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Lord, I believe, help me in my unbelief. Amen.