

JOHN 4:43-54
TAKE HIS WORD FOR IT!

What leads us to believe? Is there something in Jesus that draws us to Him? Where does our faith come from? Maybe you've never asked that question before because you just know that faith is 'there' and has been there for all of your life; you were brought up with faith, taught it by parents or your grandparents and faith has just always been part of life. But, when that faith is tested, what has kept you believing? Is there something in Jesus that you admire, that has kept you believing? We live in a world where, it would seem, people have stopped believing, and that we have to persuade people that faith is a good thing. Actually, people still think faith is a good thing; they just don't feel passion for it enough to make it part of their lives.

We read the story from John's gospel that shows us Jesus in action and also shows us people learning to believe and learning to understand what faith is actually all about. John calls this "the second sign" that Jesus performed, the first being the changing of water into wine at Cana. We're back in the same town and this time a man who works for King Herod travels the 18 miles from Capernaum to see Jesus. His son is desperately ill and he has heard of Jesus; he's heard of the miracles and comes pleading with Jesus to do a miracle on his son to heal him. Jesus says the word: "*You may...*" (*John 4:50*) and the lad is healed at the very time Jesus says these words. Here's another sign that He is the Son of God, the Messiah; these are His credentials, the ways in which people are pointed to who Jesus is and why He came into the world in the first place. These signs point people to Jesus so that they might believe.

Faith grows and develops! I professed my faith publicly when I was 17 and since then it has grown and developed in all kinds of ways. It has been shaped by what I've read in the Bible and by developing a deeper understanding of what the Bible teaches us about God. It has been shaped by my prayer, as I've related to God in the quiet places. My faith has been shaped by other people, people who have taught me such valuable things, either in face to face conversations, or from pulpits, or from books. My faith has been shaped by my experience of life, the good things and the difficult things. So my faith today still centres on Jesus, perhaps even more so today than it did when I was 17. Faith grows and develops as we read the Bible, pray, become involved in Church, and learn from experience, though if we don't do these things it won't grow and develop on its own!

Faith grows and develops in this story. At the start of the story, Jesus arrives back in Galilee having been in Jerusalem. "*When He...*" (*John 4:45*) They were interested in Jesus, the miracle worker. We're not quite sure what they had seen in Jerusalem, but they had seen something to excite them about Jesus. He was from their place; one of them, a northerner in the South, showing these southerners a thing or two and they were taken with that. So when Jesus arrived home, they were excited to have Him back, in the hope that He would do another miracle or two. They wanted to be amazed by the spectacular things of His miracle-ministry. "*Unless...*" (*John 4:48*) For Jesus, there is something not quite ringing true about that! He didn't always pander to the desire for miracles, for the spectacular, because faith in miracle and spectacle is not faith in the right thing!

Then the man comes to Jesus with a sore heart. His son is desperately sick and he begs Jesus to heal him. The man is part of Herod's court, a royal official in Capernaum; possibly there is a military post there. He comes to Jesus looking for healing for his son. He begged Him; he is down on his knees, at end of his tether, desperate for help! That, in itself, is a declaration of faith: to come to Jesus with that

kind of prayer is an admission that he thinks Jesus is able to help him, even if it is his last resort. Jesus' response: "*You may...*" (*John 4:50*) "What? Is that it? You're not going to come home with me to see my son?" That might well have been the man's reaction; it might have been our reaction, but see how John describes his actual reaction: "*The man...*" (*John 4:50b*) He accepts; He goes home and on the way home he discovers that he is right to take Jesus at His word because the boy was healed at the very moment Jesus spoke! "*Then the...*" (*John 4:53*) Does faith go one step further? Now do they believe that Jesus is who He says He is, they believe that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah?

"Take Him at His word!" Let's think about that phrase for a moment. Jesus promises this man that his son will be healed and the man accepts that; he goes home and finds it to be true. He trusted Jesus enough to take His word at face value. Here is faith that is not based on miracle and spectacle, but faith that is based on trusting Jesus, trusting His promises to be true and taking these promises as they come. James S Stewart, a preacher of an earlier generation, once preached about Jesus' second coming; said, to the effect, "I know it's true because Jesus has promised!" He was taking the promise at face value, taking Jesus at His word! Jesus has made lots of promises to us, but the question for us is how we take them and respond to them. "I will be with you always" – but we say "I don't feel him there"; or "He wasn't there when I was in trouble because He didn't answer my prayers". God promises "I will forgive your sins" – but we say that He can't possibly forgive our sins because they are too big; or it is "too good to be true; there must be a catch!" "I will build my Church" promises Jesus – but we see a church that seems to be in decline and going down and we imagine that Jesus has gone away and left us again!

But, if we take Jesus at His word, does that make a difference? "I will be with you always" – "Well, I don't see Him or feel His presence, but He's promised, so thank you Jesus for being with me when my life is tough!" "I will forgive your sins" – "I'm not sinner saved by grace!" "I will build my Church" – "Lord, I don't understand what always sure I understand how or why, but I'm delighted that you've done this; I am a you're doing, but Your Spirit is at work and I will trust you." It creates a whole different attitude when we take Jesus at His word; an attitude of faith and trust. It doesn't take away all the hard questions, indeed it even creates hard questions, but it builds a relationship of trust as we learn to trust Jesus and faith grows.

Will the real Jesus please stand up? Today we Jesus who did miracles, yes. But also today, we see Jesus who inspires faith for other reasons. Communion, the sharing of bread and wine, shows us Jesus who inspires trust, One who sacrificed Himself for us: the cross is the place where forgiveness is won; the cross is the place where He stands alongside us in our suffering; the cross is the place where the Saviour of the world completes His task; the cross is the place where our deepest needs are met. Will we take Him at His word, when He promises to be with us, to forgive, to answer our prayers, to build His Church? This is what faith is all about – "*the man...*" (*John 4:50*)