

The Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Wisdom 18:6-9
<i>Response</i>	Blessed the people the Lord has chosen to be his own.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 33:1, 12, 18-19, 20-22
<i>Second Reading</i>	Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Stay awake and be ready! For you do not know on what day your Lord will come.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 12:32-48

The 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year C takes a shift in the Church's reading from the epistles of the New Testament. Here, the Church picks up with the ending of the letter to the Hebrews. So Hebrews is one of those unique letters in the New Testament that is spread across multiple years in the liturgical cycle. So for example, the Letter to the Corinthians, 1st Letter to the Corinthians is this way as well. In year A, B and C, the church begins with a few chapters from 1st Corinthians. So she reads through 1st Corinthians over the course of the three-year cycle, and the same thing is true with the Letter to the Hebrews. We read several chapters from Hebrews in Year B, and then toward the end of Year C, we pick up and we finish off the letter with the last couple of chapters in Hebrews 11-12. So the reading for today is a rather long one, for a second reading, but that's because it's a very important passage. It's the passage on faith from Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19. So let's look at this famous description of faith and the examples given in the Letter to the Hebrews from the Old Testament. Chapter 11:1 says this:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old received divine approval.

Now it skips down to examples of faith from the men of old, talking about, again, the Old Testament. Verse eight:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land,

living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your descendants be named.” He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence he did receive him back, and this was a symbol.¹

Okay, long reading there from the Letter to the Hebrews. The reason this is such a long reading is because the theological virtue of faith, which is one of the three theological virtues: faith, hope and love, that St. Paul talks about in 1st Corinthians 13, these are essential aspects of what it means to live a life in Christ, right? These three virtues: faith, hope and love, are extremely important, and Hebrews chapter 11 is very powerful because it doesn't just give us a kind of definition, a working definition of faith. It also gives us multiple examples of what a faith that has lived out looks like from the Jewish scriptures, from the Old Testament, from the saints of the old covenant. So what I want to do here is just take a few moments to unpack the definition of faith given and also look at some of these examples. So what are the aspects of faith that are being revealed to us and exemplified to us in

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

the lives of these Old Testament saints?

So let's begin with the opening lines, which gives a kind of dual or a double definition of faith. Hold on, before we start with that. Let me just make one point. Sometimes people say, "Well, what is faith? What is hope? What is love?" It's hard to de define these particular virtues precisely because there's a multifaceted dimension to each one of them, right? Faith and hope and love are kind of like a diamond. If you turn a diamond, you can see different aspects of a diamond through the different facets of the jewel itself. And so it can be a little tricky to try to sum up in one line a theological virtue, which is actually quite mysterious and multifaceted.

So, let's just begin with the double definition at the beginning of Hebrews, and then we'll look at some of the facets of the mystery of faith in the examples. So the first point is this, the word faith is *pistis* in Greek. Now, as soon as you just say, "Now faith..." You can stop right there with the word *pistis*, you're already going to encounter the fact that this word is polyvalent. It can have more than one meaning. So for example, *pistis*, faith, can refer to belief, right? So like having faith that something is true or having faith in God can mean, I believe in God, I believe that God is real. Okay? *Pistis* can mean that.

Pistis can also mean faithful, right? You actually see this in the English word fidelity. Fidelity comes from the Latin *fides*, which is the word for faith. So someone who is faithful is trustworthy. So just as I trust God when I believe in God, so if I'm faithful, I can exercise the virtue of being trustworthy. So *pistis* can mean belief, it can mean faith, it can mean fidelity or faithfulness. It has a number of different aspects to the word taken on its own. Now, in context here in Hebrews, Hebrews highlights two particular aspects of *pistis* or faith. Faith is number one, "the assurance of things hoped for," and number two," the conviction of things not seen." Now, as soon as I say this, we run into a little bit of a problem because the two Greek words used here, *hypostasis* and *elengchos* are actually disputed in themselves. So Paul's using two somewhat obscure and disputable words to define another word, which is faith, which is why this verse can be a little difficult to unpack. But let me just give you a couple of examples of how it's been translated.

So historically, for example, the King James version, translates this first line as follows, "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not

seen." Another translation is from the Revised Standard Version, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen." And then finally, the New American Bible describes faith as "the realization of what is hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen." So you can see just from the diversity of translations that it's a little hard to get a precise English equivalent to what Paul means when he says that faith is "the *hypostasis* of things hoped for, and the *elengchos* of things not seen."

However, I think it could be helpful to realize that in this definition.... We'll see how this is illustrated in just a minute. We'll get to the examples, but just at the level of definition. It's helpful perhaps to just think about the directions that Paul's talking about. Okay, one of them is eschatological. So he is pointing forward to the future. "Faith is the substance of things hoped for." So in other words, I have faith that something I don't yet possess, I'm just hoping for it, will one day be mine. So that's the more eschatological dimension, the future point oriented aspect of faith. But then he also says, "It's the conviction or the evidence of things not seen." And here, Paul will often use that expression to refer to what we might call a more anagogical dimension or vertical dimension. In other words, there are invisible heavenly realities I can't see, but I still have the conviction that they're true, right? That they exist. That they're real. Okay. So however you translate this, what seems to be clear is that Paul thinks of faith as a belief or a trust or an assurance, that things that God has promised, that I don't yet possess, I will one day receive. And that realities that I cannot see through my visible eyes, are in fact real, that have substance to them, and that I can have the conviction that they are in fact real, that they are true.

So, in this case then, faith involves... you can already see...and Pope Benedict actually talks about this in one of his writings, that faith very quickly almost slides into hope. As soon as it starts looking forward to the future, there's a real overlapping aspect between faith in things I can't see and hope for things that I don't yet possess, because I can't see them either. So with those first verses in mind, although they are difficult and dense, the great thing is that Paul doesn't stop here just with the definition of faith. He goes on to illustrate what he means by faith by looking back at these various figures of the Old Testament. And when you look at the actual stories of these figures, you're going to see certain other aspects of what really might be called the mystery of faith, or this multifaceted reality of faith begin to emerge.

Okay. So let's start, and we'll walk through this and say, "is faith now? Not at the level of definition, but the level of example, from scripture. Okay. So the first thing we're going to notice is number one, is that faith is tied closely to obedience. This is very important. In the Letter to the Romans, Paul will actually talk about, at the very beginning and the end of it, the obedience of faith. And here, he uses Abraham as an example of that. So, first example of faith. By faith, Abraham did what?

obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go.

All right. So pause there. So what did Abraham do? He had the assurance of receiving the land, even though he didn't yet possess it. And he had the conviction of the reality of the land, even though he couldn't see it. Okay. So, on the basis of that assurance and that conviction, and by the virtue of God's promise and word alone, he leaves everything behind, and he obeys and goes on the journey to the Promised Land. So, the first key aspect of faith that Paul's highlighting here is the relationship between faith and obedience, that a true faith always manifests itself in obedience to God's word, even when we can't see or possess or don't yet possess what it is that he's promised. So faith has to do with believing that God will make good on his promises.

Second example, faith also involves patience. Look at what it says:

By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

So pause there. What does Abraham's faith lead him to do? Not just that initial act of obedience to journey of the Promised Land, but also to sojourn in the land. In other words, to live in the land that God had promised would belong to him, as if he were in exile, to patiently wait for God to give him what he had promised to give him, and to fulfill that promise by making good on it and giving the land to him and his descendants. Right? So faith involves obedience, it also involves patience. Third thing is it involves hope. Hope looks forward to some reality that's

not yet possessed, and that's exactly what Abraham does with this city, that Hebrews refers to, whose builder and maker is God. That's a very interesting description. So, Abraham goes to the Promised Land, not just for the land, but in the hope of dwelling in the city of God. We'll come back to that in just a minute as we continue to walk through Hebrews. Alright, the next example is the example of Sarah. So, with Sarah's example, we see another facet of the mystery of faith, and that's the facet of belief, of believing something to be true even when things look like it's impossible. What does Hebrew say?

By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.

Pause there. So notice, Sarah's faith manifests itself in the power to believe that even though she was past the natural physical age of being able to bear children, that if God told her he was going to give her a child, that he would be faithful to that promise and she would actually be able to conceive. And in fact, she does. So with Sarah, there's a really powerful witness here, not just to the obedience of faith or patience or hope, looking for something unseen, but what we tend to think primarily is the meaning of faith, which is to believe something to be true, right? Even when visible appearances look like it's not true, if God says it's true, Sarah accepts it. And as a result, she conceives a child even in her old age. And I love this. It's very complementary to Abraham. Hebrew says:

Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

My wife's step grandfather used to say, when you'd ask him how he was doing, he'd say, "Well, I got one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel." Which is his way of saying, "I'm coming to the end of my journey here." And you can see the same kind of image here used to describe Abraham. He's not mature, he is not just old, he's extremely old, right? He's an elderly man when God calls him forth, and begins to promise him that he's going to have children. At the level of nature his body's as good as dead. How is he going to generate life, unless through faith in the promise of God? Verse 13, this is an important one:

These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.

Pause there. Another aspect, another facet of the diamond of faith is that it involves supernatural realities. It involves heavenly realities that you can't see, you can't taste, you can't touch, and which according to the Old Testament, in this case, they don't actually receive before they die. Right? Abraham was not the ruler of the Promised Land when he died, right? They all died in faith, but not having received what had been promised to them. And that did not make them lose their faith. They kept it literally unto death, according to Hebrews. So this is a powerful passage because it shows that death itself is not, or should not be, the end of faith because the realities that God promises, even to the Old Testament saints, are supernatural realities. And the city that Abraham was actually promised that would be fulfilled, was not the earthly Jerusalem, but was the heavenly one. That's the city whose builder and maker is God, right? That's the heavenly country that they really belong to. In fact, you could make a case, what he's saying here is that the actual Promised Land is not the earthly land, but the heavenly Promised Land of the new Jerusalem. And you'll see the last two chapters of Hebrews are going to make that really explicit as we move through the rest of the letter.

Finally, the last aspect of faith, the last facet of faith that this survey of the Old Testament saints brings up is a relationship between faith and sacrifice. It says:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named." He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence he did receive him back, and this was a symbol.

Wow. Okay, so this is fascinating. So what the author of Hebrews is saying here is that the reason Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son, even though God had told him that the descendants would come through Isaac, and it would seem like if he kills him, it's impossible for him to have any descendants. The reason Abraham

offered up Isaac was precisely because he believed God's word to be true. His faith didn't just lead him to obedience, it led him to sacrifice, because he believed that even if he put his son to death, the same God who gave him that son, who was omnipotent, had the power to give his son back to him through the resurrection of the dead.

Now, many people have wondered about that verse because if you look at the book of Genesis, you could say, "Well, Hebrews is reading that into Genesis. Where is that? Where does it say anything about the resurrection of the dead in the account of the sacrifice of Isaac?" Well, we look at this sacrifice of Isaac in a little more detail in the book that Dr. John Bergsma and I wrote together called *A Catholic introduction of the Bible: The Old Testament*. So if you want to get that book, you can look at our section on the book of Genesis and the sacrifice of Isaac. For now, I just want to highlight one point that if you go back to Genesis, you can actually make a case that far from just reading into the text, the author of Hebrews is actually reading it quite closely. Because if you look at the account of Abraham in Genesis 22:5, when he leaves the young men who have his donkey and provisions behind to take Isaac up the mountain, listen to what he says:

“Stay here with the ass; I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.

Now in the original text, the original Hebrew, what's interesting about that verse is that Abraham seems to be describing a plural, "We will go and we will return," even though he's been told that he's going to sacrifice Isaac. So some scholars have suggested that the author of Hebrews sees in that verse a recognition that Abraham does expect to sacrifice his son, but he also expects that Isaac will somehow return with him because he trusts in God's promise. So he trusts that God had the power to raise him from the dead and as Hebrews said, "he did receive him back, and this was a symbol." Meaning, it's not just the sacrifice of Isaac that points forward to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, it's also the resurrection of Isaac that Abraham, the father, receives Isaac back, that points forward to the resurrection of Christ. Because although Christ, the son of the Father, is put the death on Cavalry, the Father receives him back and he rejoins the Father in his resurrection and his ascension.

So this is a very powerful passage in Hebrews 11, which just points up the fact that Abraham is much more than just a patriarch, he's much more than just an Old Testament saint, he really is, as the Church has called him in our tradition, our father in faith, because it's Abraham's faith in the book of Genesis that provides the most powerful, the most explicit prophecy or prefiguration or symbol, as the Letter to the Hebrews calls it here, of the passion, death, and resurrection of the son of the Father in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

So in closing here, if you want to dig in a little more deeply into the mystery of faith, into the virtue of faith, I want to recommend a text to you and end with a line from a text. So this is a unique encyclical. This is the Holy Father, Pope Francis' first encyclical, and it was called *Lumen Fidei*, in Latin, which means the light of faith. It's a whole encyclical dedicated to the virtue of faith, dedicated to the mystery of faith. And it's a unique encyclical because although it was published by Pope Francis, the bulk of the encyclical was actually written by Pope Benedict in 2013 before his resignation. So it has the unique status of being, I think, the only papal encyclical in history of the Church that actually was written by two popes, right? So there were two hands that crafted this one encyclical on faith. And so, I want to begin, or I want to end here just with a quote from Pope Francis on what it means to talk about the light of faith in light of our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews today. So it's kind of a long quote, but it's worth reading in full. So here, this is from *Lumen Fidei*, paragraph five, Pope Francis writes:

There is an urgent need, then, to see once again that faith is a light, for once the flame of faith dies out, all other lights begin to dim. The light of faith is unique, since it is capable of illuminating every aspect of human existence. A light this powerful cannot come from ourselves but from a more primordial source: in a word, it must come from God. Faith is born of an encounter with the living God who calls us and reveals his love, a love which precedes us and upon which we can lean for security and for building our lives. Transformed by this love, we gain fresh vision, new eyes to see; we realize that it contains a great promise of fulfilment, and that a vision of the future opens up before us. Faith, received from God as a supernatural gift, becomes a light for our way, guiding our journey through time. On the one hand, it is a light coming from the past, the light of the foundational memory

of the life of Jesus which revealed his perfectly trustworthy love, a love capable of triumphing over death.

And then the Holy Father does something interesting here, Pope Francis quotes not a Saint, not a theologian, but the Italian poet, Dante, who he loves. Very early on in his pontificate, he recommended that everyone should read Dante's *Divine Comedy*. So he quotes it, and I think this is the first time Dante is quoted in an encyclical. He writes:

Yet since Christ has risen and draws us beyond death, faith is also a light coming from the future and opening before us vast horizons which guide us beyond our isolated selves towards the breadth of communion. We come to see that faith does not dwell in shadow and gloom; it is a light for our darkness. Dante, in the Divine Comedy, after professing his faith to Saint Peter, describes that light as a “spark, which then becomes a burning flame and like a heavenly star within me glimmers.” [Dante, Divine Comedy, Paradiso XXIV.145-47)

Pope Francis continues:

It is this light of faith that I would now like to consider, so that it can grow and enlighten the present, becoming a star to brighten the horizon of our journey at a time when mankind is particularly in need of light.²

Beautiful passage. Man, so good. The reason I find it powerful is two reasons. Number one, Pope Francis's emphasis on faith as a light that illuminates our journey. We see that in Hebrews 11, right? Abraham's on a journey. Sarah's on a journey. Isaac is on a journey. All the saints of the Old Testament, they are on a path. They're walking a path with God, and the way forward is not always clear, and what illuminates the path so that they don't have to walk in darkness is precisely the Word of God. What illuminates their path is their response of faith to the Word of God. As the Psalms say, "Your word Lord is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

² Pope Francis, Encyclical *Lumen Fidei*, The Light of Faith, no. 5.

And so I just want to end with that image, that one last facet of the diamond here is to remember what Pope Francis is saying here, and remember that faith isn't just my act of believing in God. It's not even just the supernatural virtue or gift of grace that God gives to me, it really is a light that illuminates the darkness of this world, the darkness of sin and death that reigns in this world, but also just the obscurity of what path we are to take in this life, where the future is unseen to us. We don't know what tomorrow brings. And the importance of having the *Lumen Fidei*, the light of faith as the lamp that illuminates our path, that guides our feet so that we might walk the path of the word.