



Faith Discernment
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-17; Mark 8:31-38
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei

Faith is not a light switch we turn on and the light stays on until we toggle the switch again. Faith is more like a dynamo lighting set that brightens your way as you keep pedaling your bike. The harder you pedal, the brighter the light. In fact, Paul speaks of Abraham's faith as growing in strength. For Abraham, faith was a struggle; it required a "hope against hope." However, the translation we have does not account for the verb's passive mode. It isn't that Abraham's faith grew strong; it was *made* strong by God. We have no control over faith as it is a gift from God. But our participation may help at growing in faith.

The example of the dynamo may help us again. The light is a product of the lamp in front of the bike. Certainly, if we do not pedal, we won't get any light. For light to appear and brighten our way, a bulb needs to be attached to the dynamo and the dynamo can be operated by contact to a turning wheel. The pedaling participates in the miracle of lighting, but leg power is only a secondary source of power. The primary source of power is the dynamo rubbing against the wheel and creating energy for the bulb.

In spiritual terms, faith is the light that the power of the Spirit will produce when the cross of Jesus hits the rubber of life. As long as we are connected to Jesus, the Spirit will generate the necessary power of faith that enlightens our world.

Abraham is not an ancestor to emulate. But he certainly is a case in point to demonstrate how God can work with people and turn things around for the better. Abraham's behavior can cause people's eyebrows to rise especially when he cowardly claimed (twice) that his beautiful wife Sarah was his sister and not his wife so his life would be spared when the local leaders showed interests in her.¹ God entered in a covenant with him and promised to him and Sarah a multitude of descendants too great to be counted.

The initiative is God's. The blessing is God's. God's is the faithfulness to the promise and so was the faith. Abraham simply had to *grow* in it. And he did so to the point that the great apostle to the Gentiles, Paul, speaks about him as an example to follow. It's not that he had a perfect faith; his faith was *made* perfect by the Spirit of God and it was not earned but given. His faith was strengthened in adversity and the certainty of hope gave him the endurance to stuck with God even though he wouldn't see the full actualization of God's promises. He just kept pedaling. Paul remarks that the life of Abraham is relevant "*for our sake*" (v. 24).

From Paul's reflection, it is evident that *faith is necessary for discernment*. God's promises are not anything we can earn by obeying the law. What the law does is simply telling us what we need to know for safe and righteous living. Following the law is the least we can do to survive

¹ Genesis 12 and 20, a cunning expedient copied later by his own son Isaac (see Genesis 26)



Faith Discernment
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-17; Mark 8:31-38
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei

and protect everyone on the planet. There is no merit in that. There is no need of faith for that. The purpose of the law is for community building and for regulating life together. The law per se is already a gift of God's goodness. Anything extra is the cherry on God's grace cake.

Last week we heard of the covenant of God with Noah and with all the world. In that covenant, God promised universal salvation. What we hear this week is God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah. God promises that they will have a large descendance and a land, and indicates that through them the whole world will receive a blessing.² In fact, (Christian-Muslim-Jews PHOTO) Jews, Muslims, and Christians find the origin of their faith in Abraham and are, therefore, the multitude of nations that were promised to Abraham and Sarah.

But what does that mean? How do we live in faith? What do we mean with the word "faith"? by looking at the many expressions of faith in the Bible and the witnesses of the faith throughout the centuries, we can surmise that faith is not a collection of doctrines but an attitude. It is the total trust in God especially when everything is stacked against the odds. It's knowing that God's promises will come through no matter what because that is the character of God: God's trustworthiness and faithfulness is everlasting.³

Today's passage from Mark picks up in the middle of a conversation between Jesus and his disciples. Jesus has just confirmed Peter's intuition (Peter's Confession PHOTO) that he is the Messiah (Mark 8:27-30). Yet, there is a misunderstanding brewing: it is easy for the disciples to associate this title with earthly glory. After all, they have noticed how he is able to attract the crowds of mostly peasant villagers; they have listened to his teachings and witness his healing powers.⁴ When local leaders oppose Jesus, he always bests them in debate,⁵ so the disciples easily imagine themselves as future officers of the new kingdom with Jesus as their leader.⁶

Jesus knows what he is facing, though. He knows that he will die because powerful people oppose both his healing mission and, more specifically, the disruption that his actions threaten to bring to established law and order. Unbeknownst to Jesus' opponents, they are resisting the in-breaking reign of God. The message he comes to offer is a message of healing of human relations, a message that by its very nature exposes unjust systems and threatens to dislodge abusive powerful players. Jesus doesn't rise *against* something. He stands *for* something. He doesn't rise against lies and abuses; he stands for truth and justice. But he also knows that when

² Genesis 12, 13, 15.

³ A few examples may be found here: Numbers 23:19; Deuteronomy 7:9; Jeremiah 29:11-13

⁴ For example, Mark 2:1; 3:7-10; 4:1; 6:53-56

⁵ Mark 2:6-12; 3:22-27; 7:1-13

⁶ Mark 9:33-34 and 10:35-37.



Faith Discernment
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-17; Mark 8:31-38
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei

one stands for truth and justice and works to alleviate human suffering, evil structures are going to be exposed and not everybody will be happy.

That is why he says that those (Take up your cross PHOTO) who want to follow him need to brace their cross. Those who love him and do as he does will encounter opposition, too. That comes with the territory and is prefigured in the waters of Baptism. Jesus doesn't say, "Go get your swimming gear and follow me for a day at the beach." He doesn't even say, "Got get your sword and follow me into battle." His revolution turns the operating principles of this world on their head. But he is certainly not advocating a violent struggle.

He talks about a cross because he promotes non-violent resistance: (MLK in jail PHOTO) vulnerability is how he wants to advance the cause of the kingdom. Those who follow him through Baptism will embrace his Way of vulnerability, simplicity, and humility. They will not want to harm their enemies but love them, pray for them, and do all sorts of creative kindness to them. Faith in him trains our discernment process.

It takes discernment to know in faith what to do when he calls. It takes discernment to know that when we put our favorite TV show, our card game, all our fun activities (no matter how attractive, desirable, and helpful they are) before prayer and worship, we are letting the things of this world distract us. When we put selfishness, stubbornness, and pride before truth, humility, repentance, and transformation, we are not choosing to follow him but just our self-righteousness. When we hold on to rancor and hatred in our heart, we are not holding on to him and are stuck in fear. And when we are assailed by bitterness and cynicism and are tempted to reply with sarcasm or disillusionment, we are not tapping into the gifts of the Spirit and the joy of the kingdom into which we are called. That's when Satan needs to get behind and not in front of Jesus.

It is when we pick up our cross in faith that we get closer to Jesus. And from the height of that cross, we get a better perspective of the world beneath us.

How has the encounter with Jesus changed your life? Has Christianity brought you privilege or persecution, fame or harassment? It is easy to see how Peter is a stumbling block to Jesus in his way of protecting him from harm. But by choosing the comfortable way out (for Jesus and by extension, for himself and us) means impeding Jesus from being true to his calling. Peter is not discerning in faith. He is simply being practical. Or is he scared? What do you do when fear takes over? It is easy to respond from our reactivity when threatened. Breathing into our fears gives us the spaciousness to base our choices on God's promises. We know God is always present and forever faithful. Because of this knowledge, Jesus was able to bet his life on God.



Faith Discernment

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-17; Mark 8:31-38

Reverend Giuseppe Mattei

So, he calls Peter out. Jesus acts on his principles and sense of calling. His purpose is not to embarrass Peter but to affirm where he stands. The Hebrew word “satan” means “one who resists.”⁷ Peter is resisting Jesus’ plan to remain faithful until the bitter end. He is telling Peter that it is not a good idea to discourage one from speaking the truth and doing what is right. When Jesus calls Peter “satan” something remarkable happened: *nothing* happened. Peter did not storm out offended; he didn’t turn to the other disciples to play the victim and find allies. He stuck it out and continued his faith journey after Jesus.

At the end of the day, (bike light at night PHOTO) it is a good exercise to ask ourselves: What got me through today? What did I lean on? Whom did I trust? How did I worship the living God through my words and actions? Where did I stay faithful?

When God spoke to Abram, he bowed his face down in worship. May our faith in God teach us discernment. Amen.

⁷ [Satan Definition and Meaning - Bible Dictionary \(biblestudytools.com\)](http://biblestudytools.com)