

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

Br. Samuel Springuel

11 August, 2019

1st Reading Wisdom 18:6–9

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 33:1,12,18–19,20–22

2nd Reading Hebrews 11:1–2,8–19

Gospel Luke 12:32–48

Faith is often criticized as being blind. In the face of no evidence, or even contrary evidence, the person of faith resolutely sticks to their guns and stubbornly refuses to change their mind. They are incapable of change, of adapting to new circumstances. Faith is the refuge of the closed minded who refuse to think for themselves and meekly submit to authority. True knowledge is obtained only by skepticism; by questioning what is “known” so that it can be refined and made better. Faith presents a false security which cuts us off from true knowledge.

At first glance today’s readings do nothing to counter this argument. “The evidence of things unseen” sounds very much like discounting real evidence, what can be seen, in favor of one’s preconceived notions. Indeed, many people have interpreted it in just that way. As I meditated on the notion of faith in the light of these readings this week, however, I’ve come to see a different possibility. A pairing of certainty with uncertainty in which the two coexist like the Yin and Yang of Chinese Taoism.

Certainty, a rock solid base, something which you can rely on. For Abraham this was the promise of God: a promise of children and of land. Old beyond the usual childbearing years, a foreigner wandering in a strange land, Abraham heard the promise and believed, trusted, in its fulfillment. Even in the face of the unreasonable, the demand to sacrifice Issac, the child of the promise, Abraham was certain that God would fulfill the promise. The certainty which Abraham must have felt is awe inspiring.

It was this certainty which the children of Israel inherited, which they put into action at the first Passover. Slaves in Egypt, foreigners at the bottom of the social ladder who had seen first hand just how stubborn Pharaoh could be, they heard the words of God through Moses and trusted that God would act to set them free. They sacrificed the Passover lamb and ate it according to the precepts given to them and in doing so demonstrated once more the certainty in God which their father Abraham had bequeathed them.

The old stories of faith are too easily wrapped in certainty, however. With 20/20 hindsight, later generations can see the promise fulfilled, at least in part, and count the reward of faithfulness. Prophecy becomes history and the uncertainty, the doubt and worry and questions, are relegated to the dustbin.

Jesus's parables, however, bring that uncertainty back to the fore. Certainty is not banished, but uncertainty takes its rightful place along side it. The servants know, they are certain, that their master will return. They don't know, they are uncertain, as to exactly when and must keep watch so as to be always ready. Uncertainty is present in certainty. To have faith is to live both simultaneously.

To forget this is to become like the unfaithful steward. Put in charge, he becomes drunk on his power and certain in his own abilities. He forgets, or pushes aside, the uncertainty of his master's return: "Surely he will not come today, or tomorrow," he says to himself, "I will have time to put things in order." Uncertainty, doubt, these are things for tomorrow, for someone else. Today is in his control and he will do with it as he wills. In forgetting the uncertainty, the unfaithful steward forgets himself and his place, becoming contemptible and deserving of punishment.

Faith is not blind. It is not certainty in the face of uncertainty. True faith juxtaposes them, tempers certainty with uncertainty to make something stronger than either. Without uncertainty, certainty is brittle and subject to shattering if pressed too hard. Without certainty, uncertainty is fluid, unstable, incapable of building anything which lasts. In calling us to faith, Jesus is asking us to strike the balance. To be sure of God, but unsure of our understanding. To be flexible and willing to adapt to changing circumstances, but always fixed on that which is true and right and just. To be certain of God's help, but uncertain and therefore open to the form it might take. Faith is not blind, it is a clear eyed acceptance of the real.