

LIFE OF FAITH

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This is the text of a homily given by Mgr Escrivá on 12 October 1947.

One sometimes hears it said that there are fewer miracles today. Might it not rather be that there are fewer people living a life of faith? God cannot go back on his promise: 'Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession' (Ps 2:9). Our God is Truth, the basis of all existence; nothing is done against his almighty will.

'As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end'¹. The Lord does not change. Having everything, he cannot pursue what he might not have. He is all motion, all beauty, all grandeur. Today as always. 'The heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment . . .; but my salvation will be for ever and my deliverance will never be ended' (Is 51:6).

In Jesus Christ God has established a new and everlasting alliance with mankind. He has pledged his omnipotence to the service of our salvation. When his creatures lose confidence, when they are afraid through lack of faith, we hear once again the voice of Isaiah speaking in the name of the Lord: 'Is my hand shortened that I cannot redeem? Or have I no power to deliver? Behold by my rebuke I dry up the sea, I make the rivers a desert; their fish lie rotting for lack of water and die of thirst. I clothe the heavens with darkness, and make sackcloth their covering' (Is 50:2-3).

Faith is a supernatural virtue that enables our intellect to accept revealed truths, to say 'yes' to Christ, allowing us to understand fully the blessed Trinity's plan for our salvation. 'In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high' (Heb 1:1-3).

BY THE POOL OF SILOE

I would like Jesus himself to talk to us about faith, to give us lessons in faith. So let us open the New Testament and re-live with him some of the incidents in his life. He did not disdain to teach his disciples, showing them, little by little, how to give themselves wholeheartedly to carrying out the will of his Father.

He taught both by words and deeds.

Consider chapter nine of St John. 'As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"' (Jn 9:1-2). These men, even though they were so close to Christ, could still think badly about that poor blind man. So do not be surprised if, when serving the Church in your daily lives, you also come upon Christians behaving in the same way to you or others. Do not worry and, like the blind man, take no notice of it. Just place yourselves wholeheartedly in Christ's hands. He does not accuse, he pardons. He does not condemn, he forgives. Confronted with illness, he is not indifferent, but with divine diligence finds the remedy.

Our Lord 'spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle and anointed the man's eyes with the clay, saying to him: "Go and wash in the pool of Siloe (which means Sent)." So he went and washed and came back seeing' (Jn 9:6-7).

What an example of positive faith the blind man gives us! A living faith, an active faith. Do you behave like this when God commands, when you are so often blind, when your soul is darkened by personal worries? What power could there possibly be in the water that when applied to the eyes it cured them? Surely some secret eye salve, some precious medicine prepared in a laboratory by some wise alchemist would have done better. But that man believed. God's word is his deed, and as a result the man's eyes are filled with brightness.

St Augustine commenting on this passage writes: 'It seems useful that the evangelist should have explained the significance of the name of the pool, saying that it meant Sent. Now you understand who has been sent. If the Lord had not been sent to us, none of us would have been freed from sin'². We must have complete faith in him who saves us, in this divine doctor who was sent expressly to make us whole. And to believe all the more when our illness is more serious or hopeless.

We must learn to acquire the divine measure of things, never losing sight of the supernatural world and counting on the use that Jesus makes of our sufferings to reveal his glory. That is why, when your conscience feels the stirrings of self-love, of weariness, of discouragement, of the demands of your passions, you must react immediately and listen to the teachings of our Lord. You must not be frightened at the sad reality of what we all are. For as long as we live, our personal failings will always be with us.

This is the Christian's way. We have to pray for help

all the time, with a faith both strong and humble. 'Lord, put not your trust in me. But I put my trust in you.' And as we sense the love, the compassion, the tenderness of Christ's gaze upon us—for he never abandons us—we shall better understand the deep meaning of the words of the Apostle: 'strength is made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor 12:9). With faith in our Lord, despite our wretchedness or rather because of our wretchedness, we shall be faithful to God our Father. His power will shine forth sustaining us in our weakness.

THE FAITH OF BARTIMEUS

St Mark tells us of the cure of another blind man. 'As he was leaving Jericho, with his disciples and a great multitude, Bartimeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timeus, was sitting by the roadside' (Mk 10:46). When he heard the noise of the crowd the blind man asked, 'What is happening?' and they replied, 'It is Jesus of Nazareth.' And then the blind man, his soul on fire with his belief in Christ, cried out: 'Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me' (Mk 10:47).

Does this not make you too want to cry out, when you have also stopped by the side of the road, of that roadway of life that is so short; you who are so dim-sighted. You who require more grace before deciding on a life of holiness? Are you not also tempted to cry out: 'Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me'? What a beautiful aspiration, a prayer to repeat again and again!

I recommend that you meditate slowly on the moments preceding the miracle, so as to keep this fundamental idea clearly engraved on your minds. What a world of difference there is between our poor hearts and the compassionate heart of Jesus! It will always be there to sustain you, especially in the hour of trial and temptation and also when he asks you to make a generous response in little things as well as on great occasions.

'And many rebuked him trying to silence him' (Mk 10:48). Just as they have done to you when you have sensed the presence of Jesus on your path. Your heart beat faster and you too began to cry out from your troubled soul. But friends, customs, convenience, conventions, all advised: Be silent, do not speak. Why must you cry out to Jesus? Leave him in peace!

But poor Bartimeus would not listen to them and still cried out the more: 'Son of David, have pity on me.' Our Lord, who had heard him from the beginning, let him repeat his prayer. The same with you. Jesus, hearing the first cry from our soul, still waits. He wants us to be convinced that we have need of him. He wants us to beseech him, to persist as the blind man did by the road from Jericho. 'Let us make him our example. Even if God does not immediately give us what we ask, even if lots of people try to put us off our prayers, still let us go on praying'³.

'And Jesus stopped and said, "Call him"'. And some of the better people in the crowd called the blind man saying: 'Take heart; rise, he is calling you' (Mk 10:49). Here you have the Christian vocation.

But God does not limit himself to calling us once. Our Lord is seeking us all the time. Get up, he says, rise from your sloth, your comfort, your petty selfishness, rise from your little insignificant problems. Take off from where you are earthbound, flat and shapeless. Acquire height, weight and volume and a supernatural outlook.

That man 'throwing off his cloak sprang up and came to Jesus' (Mk 10:50). Throwing off his cloak! I do not know if you have ever been on a battlefield. Many years ago I had the occasion to visit a battlefield shortly after an engagement, and there strewn on the ground were greatcoats, water bottles, haversacks stuffed with family souvenirs, letters, photographs of loved ones. And they belonged not to the vanquished but to the victors. All their things had become burdensome as they charged forward to attack the enemy trenches. Like Bartimeus in his pursuit of Christ.

Never forget that to reach Christ there must be sacrifices. Cast aside all that encumbers you—greatcoat, haversack, water bottle . . . And you must do the same in this battle for the glory of God, in our loving and peaceful struggle for the extension of Christ's kingdom. In the service of the Church and the pope and of souls, you must be ready to dispense with everything superfluous; to have no cloak to shelter you from the bitter night cold; to keep no loving souvenirs of your family; to have no water to refresh you. This is the lesson taught us by faith and by love, for it is in this way that we must love Christ.

FAITH WITH DEEDS

And now begins our dialogue with God, something wonderful that will move us, will set our hearts on fire. Let us be Bartimeus. Christ who is God is speaking and asks: 'What do you want me to do for you?' And the blind man replies, 'Lord, that I may see' (Mk 10:46). How very logical! And you, too. Has the same thing not happened to you as to the blind man of Jericho? When meditating on this passage many years back and realizing that Jesus was expecting something of me, something, and I myself did not know what it was, I can never forget how I could only cry out in prayer: Lord, what is it you want? What do you ask of me? I had a feeling that he wanted me to take on something new. Bartimeus' cry, 'Lord, that I may see,' suddenly moved me to beseech Christ again and again: Lord, whatever you wish, be it done.

Now pray with me: 'Teach me to do your will, for you are my God' (Ps 142:10). In a word, our lips must express our true desire to correspond effectively to our Creator's invitation, striving to follow out his plans with unflinching faith, in the full knowledge that he can never err. If we so love God's will, we shall come to understand what the value of faith is, not only in how clearly we can explain or define it, but in our determination to defend it by our deeds; and we shall act accordingly.

But, let us go back to that scene outside Jericho. Now Christ is talking to you. He asks you: What is it you want of me? That I may see, Lord, that I may see. And Jesus answers: 'Go your way; your faith has saved you. And immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way' (Mk 10:52). To follow him on the way. You have understood what our Lord was asking of you and have decided to go along with him. You are trying to walk in his footsteps, to clothe yourself in Christ's clothing, to be Christ himself. In that case your faith, your belief in the light of our Lord is giving you, must entail both work and sacrifice. Avoid wishful thinking or looking for new ways. Such is the faith he demands of us, and we must keep in step with it, working generously. At the same time we must tear up and discard anything that gets in the way.

FAITH AND HUMILITY

And now it is St Matthew who tells us of a most touching event. 'And behold a woman who had suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment' (Mt 9:20). How great her humility! 'For she said to herself, "If I only touch his garment, I shall be made well"' (Mt 9:21). There are always sick people who, like Bartimeus, pray with great faith and have no qualms about confessing it at the top of the voices. But notice how, among those whom Christ encounters, no two souls are alike. This woman too has great faith, but she does not cry aloud. She draws near to Jesus with no one noticing. It is enough just to touch his robe, for she is quite certain she will be cured. Hardly has she done so, when our Lord turns around and looks at her. He knows the intimate feelings of her heart and has seen how sure she is: 'Take heart, daughter; your faith has saved you' (Mt 9:22).

'She delicately touched the hem of the garment, she came up with faith, she believed and she knew she had been cured. If we want to be saved, so should we touch with faith the garment of Christ'⁴. Do you see now how our faith must be? A humble faith. Who are you, and who am I, to deserve to be called by Christ? Who are we, to be so close to him? Like that poor woman in the crowd, we have been offered a chance. And not just to touch his garments, to feel for a moment the edge, the fringe of his cloak. We have him himself. He gives himself to us wholly, with his body, with his blood, with his soul and with his divinity. He is our daily food, we can talk to him intimately, as to a father or a loved one. And this is the truth, this is no fantasy.

Let us try to strengthen our humility. For only a truly humble faith will allow us to see the supernatural world. There is no other alternative. There are only two ways of living on this earth: either we live a supernatural life or an animal one. And you and I can only live for love of God, a supernatural life. 'For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?' (Mt 16:26). What use to man is everything on earth, all that our mind and

desire can aspire to? What use is this, if it is all to end and sink out of sight, if all the riches of the world are but theatrical scenery, if after all this there is still eternity for ever, for ever, for ever?

This expression 'for ever' made St Teresa of Avila great. One day, as a child, she set out with her brother Rodrigo through the Adaja gate in the city walls of Avila, to seek out the land of the Moors who they would have their heads cut off for Christ. As they walked along, she cheered up her flagging brother saying: 'For ever, for ever, for ever'⁵.

CONTEMPLATION FOR EVERY DAY

Let us go back to the Gospels and consider for a while what St Matthew tells us in chapter 21. He describes how Jesus 'returning to the city was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the wayside he went to it' (Mt 21:18). How happy it makes us to see you, Lord hungry! To see you thirsty, too, beside the well of Sichar (cf Jn 4:7). There I can behold you, *perfectus Deus, perfectus homo*⁶, truly God, yet truly man, with flesh like my flesh. 'He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave' (Phil 2:7), so that I should never have any doubt that he understands me and loves me.

'He was hungry.' When we grow weary, in our work in our studies, in our apostolate, when our horizon is darkened by lowering clouds, let us turn our eyes toward Christ, the good Jesus who is also weary, who is also hungry and suffering thirst. Lord, how clear you make yourself! How lovable you are! You show yourself to be just like us, in all except sin; so that we can feel that with you we can conquer all our faults. For neither weariness, nor hunger matters, nor thirst, nor tears. Christ also grew weary, was hungry, was thirsty, wept. What matters is our struggle—a cheerful struggle, for our Lord is always by our side—to carry out the will of God our Father who is in heaven (cf Jn 4:34).

He goes to the fig tree. He comes also to you, he comes to me. Jesus is hungry and thirsty for souls. From the cross he cried out, 'I thirst!' (Jn 19:28). Thirsty for us, for our love, for our souls and for all those souls which we must bring to him, by the way of the cross which is the way to immortality and heavenly glory.

He came up to the fig tree 'and found nothing on it but leaves only' (Mt 21:19). How deplorable! But does the same happen in our lives? Do we sadly lack faith and humility? Have we no sacrifices, no good works to offer him? Are we only christian in appearances, with nothing real within? This would be terrible, for Jesus then commanded: 'May no fruit come from you ever again' (Mt 21:19). This Gospel passage makes us feel sorry, yet at the same time it encourages us to strengthen our faith, to live by faith, so that Christ may always receive some profit from us.

Let us not deceive ourselves. Our Lord does not depend upon our human undertakings; our most ambitious projects are for him little more than child's play. What he wants are souls, he wants love.