

Fifth Sunday of Lent

A personal encounter



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Be Opened ... to Believe

Hi, my name is Chad. What does it mean to believe? Is it as simple as just stating that we accept certain truths of the Faith? I was born in a Christian home, so for as long as I can remember, I 'believed' in some sort of sense. But when I grew up, I had to make this choice of faith my own as an adult. This decision for faith is more than just a one-off action – it requires an ongoing resolve to believe, particularly today in a society that is generally indifferent to faith, in which our belief often doesn't play any part in our day-to-day life. For this process to continue in us beyond a simple statement of faith, we have to be progressively opened to believe.

For many years during my adult faith journey, my belief was very much an intellectual thing. I was a sincere Christian, but looking back I think that I didn't want to expect too much from my faith. I didn't want to be disappointed if the whole 'faith thing' didn't work – didn't change things in my life or the lives of those around me – so I kept God at a distance; not by a conscious choice, but nevertheless in effect by not inviting him deeper into all aspects of my life.

In this way, I think I was a bit like Martha in the Gospel: when Jesus tells her that her 'brother will rise again' she makes a true statement of faith – 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day'. Now this is true, but it also puts the question of faith 'out there' in the far away time of the end of the world: that is a faith that doesn't ask for anything in the here and now, because it doesn't really expect that God will act. This fear that God may not actually respond to our needs can have a paralysing effect on our spiritual lives: it certainly did for me, for a long time. Obviously faith is needed to overcome this obstacle: but how does this happen, when faith itself is the problem?

Into this seemingly irresolvable paradox comes Jesus: who is always breaking through our self-erected barriers to touch us where we most need his help. He does so very gently, with an invitation that takes the form of a question, not a demand. In response to Martha's statement about the resurrection being on the last day, Jesus says, 'I am the resurrection and the life ... Do you believe this?'. So for the remote idea of a resurrection off there at the end of time, he substitutes his living presence, here and now; instead of an abstract statement of faith, he poses the personal question: 'do you believe?'. Archbishop Mark Coleridge, president of the Australian Catholic Bishop's Conference, is fond of saying that whenever God asks a question in scripture, it is for our benefit, not his – God already knows the answer. And so I think it is here: Jesus' question, 'do you believe?', is an invitation to belief, one that brings with it the power to believe if we are open to receive it. It is Jesus who gives Martha the power to make the great confession, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God'.

Jesus did the same thing for me. He has continued to question me, over the years, to help me to see that he is acting in my life, directly and through other people. Gradually, but at particular times powerfully and unmistakably, he has opened my heart to believe. This happens to everyone, eventually, who listens to Jesus when he questions them – even if the process is slower for some of us than for others! And when we listen we can be certain, too, that God always hears us when we respond to that voice, just as he always hears his beloved Son; like Lazarus come forth from the tomb, we will be able to say that God unbinds us, and sets us free.