

SUMMARY: FAITH ENTERED/EXPERIENCED/ENGAGED (3/3) *(James 2:14-17)*

We've been glimpsing these dynamics around our faith (1) how we enter it on the basis of what we are given to believe, (2) how our beliefs actually affect us, how we come actually to encounter/ to experience what we believe, and (3) ...what we almost naturally come to do about that - how we come to express our faith - live out of our beliefs, practically! It's these 3 dimensions of how our faith in God through Jesus Christ is cognitively ENTERED/ how it is subjectively EXPERIENCED/ and then how it is practically ENGAGED - lived!

Just what exactly is it that you choose to believe: About God? About yourself? About creation? And what difference does what you believe make to your experience of reality, and how you choose to live your life?

We've been speaking about the 'Perennial Tradition' - this drumbeat that pulses as a constant theme through all the major world religions - affirmed by St Augustine and many others down the ages, all the way to the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church in the early 1960s. It's these 3 pillars that assert our faith (1) in God as this Most Loving Reality under and within everything. (2) It's also about the longing we all have to find and live into our place within an awareness of that everywhere-at-once-present God. And it's our faith (3) that the driving goal within us and all existence is to own and to grow into an ever deepening awareness of our place within that one sacred reality.

Last week, we looked at how we allow what we say we believe actually to impact our lives. We revisited an experience of Thomas Merton in Louisvilleⁱ, how at the corner of 'Walnut and Fourth Streets' he had this entirely unexpected experience of sacred holiness. *"I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of (false) self-isolation... This sense of liberation was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud...I have the immense joy of being (hu)man, a member of a race in which God ...became incarnate. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."*

Remember Jesus' encounter with that blind Bartimaeus who was just fed up with the darkness in which he was living? As Jesus passed him by: ***What do you want from me?*** Jesus asked him, even as he asks each one of us!ⁱⁱ: ***what do I most want from you Jesus?*** Well, ***I too want to see!*** And WHAT a difference this 'seeing of God's Holiness' all around us must make to our living.

In his most recent blog post Richard Rohrⁱⁱⁱ quotes Brian McLaren describing someone's imaginary experience of heaven: *Imagine that you have just died and passed through the doorway of death. And you enter heaven. And it is a place of intense brightness, a place fragrant with goodness... alive with love. The presence of God seems to pervade everyone and every thing. People are humble and genuinely interested in others. It is a place of true freedom, trust, and intimacy.*

And even though it is a place of great diversity, with people of all cultures and languages and times retaining all their uniqueness, it is a place where no one argues, no one fights, no one hates, and no one complains—not because they aren't allowed to but because they don't want to, because they accept and love one another completely. They are fully alive. Think about how you would feel entering that place.

Now imagine that someone has walked beside you through that doorway of death. And that person has lived his life cramped in hatred and fear, tight in guilt and greed, ingrown in lust and selfishness. He has spent every day of his life complaining and being bitter and blaming others and being ungrateful. He has been suspicious of those different from himself, and he has become an expert at lying and cheating and using others. He is proud, arrogant, unwilling to admit he is wrong. Now, how would that person feel? Could it be that the very light that seems beautiful to you would seem blinding to him? Could the very warmth of the love of that place that to you is so perfect seem to him horrible? Could the acceptance and love and trust and openness that welcome you seem to him disgusting, weak, terrifying, insipid, or repulsive?

Maybe it's not that there are two places beyond the door of death, heaven and hell. Sometimes I wonder if hell is just what heaven feels like for those who haven't learned in this life what this life is intended to teach. I believe with all my heart that God is not willing for even one person to miss out on the joy and glories of heaven. We are becoming on this side of the door of death the kind of people we'll be on the other.

James Finley ^{iv} speaks of the gift of us being enabled to take **'long, loving, looks'** at our contexts. These pierce the illusion of all that would otherwise block and fog our vision, and instead help us to see reality as God has already established it in Christ to be now – and from before even time began! It's the ability for us to be able to look long enough and lovingly enough at, everything, until we too can get to see God - everywhere... That we cannot see God everywhere in fact says more about us and what we allow to block our vision than about the God who is always straining to be revealed. And so we sing for God to **'Open our Eyes'** and to **'Be our Vision'** because we truly do want to see God – and to see properly – even as this source of ultimately sacred love we believe God is!

Is that what your Christian faith is currently allowing you to see? Just what do you see as you allow yourself to look up and around? What do you see of God: just some external and remote power, or do you see something/someone much more close? More intimate? More present? What do you see of creation: Something passively, inanimately available for us to use or abuse as we wish, or something profoundly God-filled and gifted for us to respect and nurture? What do you see of yourself: just some jumble of ageing organs stumbling through life making some good decisions but also lots of mistakes, or as something ultimately SOOO loved and beautiful created as we are in God's image...

As Christ-followers, surely we must know that we are called to notice and to live lives that are dedicated to embracing and reflecting God's sacred reality: This God-reality, totally soaked in justice, compassion, mercy, and most of all, poured-out love! What a difference our properly seeing must make to all our living. This again from James Finley:^v:

Imagine you are out walking on the beach and God says, “Go ahead, pick a grain of sand, any grain.” No matter what grain of sand you choose, God is present in it. Since God is not subject to division or diminishment of any kind, God is completely present in that one little grain of sand. Then... “ God says, “pick any other place, a situation, a circumstance in which you might find yourself. If you choose a wooded area, you may see yourself surrounded by trees. Well, God is there, inviting you to reach out and pick a leaf off one of the low-hanging branches. As you do so, you realize you are holding a leaf in which the totality of reality is wholly present. If you choose your own home, God is there, inviting you to choose something, anything at all: the teakettle on the stove, or perhaps a chair in a corner of the living room. No matter what you might choose, you realize you are choosing something in which God is wholly present, loving you, and all people and things, into being.

Then God invites you to reflect on any aspect of yourself. No matter what aspect of yourself you focus on, God is there, wholly present in each breath, each thought and feeling, each turn of your head. You realize, as you sit, that God is present as the ungraspable immediacy of your sitting. As you stand, God is there as the ungraspable immediacy of your standing. As you laugh, God is there as your laughter. As you cry, God is wholly present in each tear that falls from your eyes. It does not matter what little thing you might choose, within or around you. It might just be the thing that awakens you from your fitful dream of being separate from God, who is the reality of yourself and all that is real.

*May each of us be so fortunate as to be overtaken by God in the midst of little things. May we each be so blessed as to be finished off by God, swooping down from above or welling up from beneath, to extinguish the illusion of separateness that perpetuates our fears. May we, in having our illusory, separate self **slain** by God, be born into a new and true awareness of who we really are: one with God forever!*

I end by emphasizing the main point of our reading from James 2 once again: that **‘Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead!’** What I’m suggesting in this little series is that our believing and seeing God in all things and everywhere is the one work that must always be the result of our faith: the result of our following Jesus Christ, given to fill up our sense of self and then motivate and mobilize all the other things that we are to know and to do!!!

But for us properly to be able to embrace that, well, we do need firstly to have our eyes opened – and opened enough to allow that perception to happen! O, may that be our reality – and whatever that comes to mean in each one of our lives – may that be enough!
Amen.

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ⁱ Described in his book *‘Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander’*

ⁱⁱ [Mark 10:46-52](#), [Luke 18:35-43](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ Daily Meditations Center for Action and Contemplation, September 17, 2021

^{iv} Faculty of the Center for Action and Contemplation

^v Onening (Vol 1, No.1) The Perennial Tradition. CAC Publishing 2013 ‘Epilogue’