

In 1893, engineer George Ferris built a machine that has born his name ever since - the Ferris wheel. When the prototype was finished, the likes of which no one had seen before, it was quickly put to the test. Ferris invited a newspaper reporter to accompany him and his wife for the inaugural ride. It was a very windy July day, and a fierce wind struck the wheel with great force as it slowly began its first rotation and the great contraption shook violently. Despite the heavy wind, the wheel turned flawlessly. After one revolution, Ferris called for the machine to be stopped so that he, his wife, and the reporter could step out. It was widely reported that this event was a great manifestation of faith. In braving that one revolution on the windblown Ferris wheel, each occupant had demonstrated genuine faith. Mr. Ferris began with the scientific knowledge that the machine would work and that it would be safe. Mrs. Ferris and the reporter believed the machine would work on the basis of what the inventor had said. But only during and after *the ride*, could it be said of all three that they had personal, experiential faith.

The story makes a useful point about the kind of risks people are prepared to take because they believe in something (inventors have a particular reputation for this!) and the effects of living through and experiencing that act of faith. But stories of courageous acts far braver than this are to be found throughout history. People sometimes do extraordinary selfless things, against all the odds. Many people are prepared to take incredible leaps into the unknown, motivated only by faith.

The letter to the Hebrews, sets out the challenges and demands of real Christian faith. It speaks of remarkable people – the great heroes of faith that we remember today – those who have made great sacrifices, endured imprisonment, torture and even death, driven only by a deep faith in God to overcome their fear. We hear an unequivocally need for spiritual discipline, fortitude and courageously staying the course to the very end. It is a powerful vision of faith but one that can terrify as much as it can arouse admiration or stimulate action. How many of us would be prepared to die for our beliefs – indeed how many of us would be prepared to willingly die for *anything*?

This begs many questions about the nature of our faith and what we claim to mean by having a faith. It is interesting to note that in much social conversation and media discussion there is often much talk about *having faith* rather than *living by faith*. *Having faith* suggests something you can choose to take on board or reject at will. Yet most people it seems have some kind of faith by which they live. That faith might be nothing more than a belief that life is meaningless but they are curious enough to want to know what comes next. But for others, faith in things – particularly things unseen, is very profound and permeates their whole being and leads them through every fear and challenge imaginable.

But how do we understand or define faith in a way that makes it intelligible to sceptical minds? There is the well-worn story of the teacher who asks a schoolboy: What is faith? And the boy famously replies: “believing in something you know is not true”. This response is probably not too far from the view held by many of the worlds sceptics. For them, religious faith concerns itself with unseen, unverifiable, implausible forces. So where faith is concerned for many people - you either have it or you don't. As Frederick Buechner has pointed out (in his useful little book called *Wishful Thinking*): “Faith is better understood as a verb than as a noun, as a process than as a possession. It is on-again-off-again rather than once-and-for-all. Faith is not being sure where your going but going anyway. A journey without maps”.

Faith is a life journey that has to be lived, with all its twists and turns, occasional wrong turnings and blind alleys. Faith is something that has to be lived *in*. It is not something that you opt in or out of or treat as a bolt-on extra to life. So to *have faith 'in'* Jesus

Christ is really another way of saying that you live life *'in'* Jesus Christ. It is about finding a way to live in which the things we say and do and what Jesus has said and done are in some way meaningfully linked together. *That* is living by faith. And tangible 'proofs' have little to do with it. We all have friends, but we cannot 'prove' a friendship. When you experience it you don't need to prove it. When we don't experience a friendship, no proof will suffice. And if in some way we try to test our friendship the very nature of the test would probably cause things to go awry and probably taint that friendship. So it is with the experience of living in God and with God.

But is our faith experience authentic? Do we really live by a robust, authentic faith or is it just something syrupy and sentimental with little real substance? For many, policing correct belief (as they perceive it), as well as worship and devotion become the primary focus to the extent that the practical demands of the world can take second place. As one Unitarian writer has remarked: "...too often, faith is tied up with pale light, subdued music, and softly spoken words of comfort". Worship is of course central to our religious practice but it is often true that the things we say we worship and the things our lives show we value may be poles apart. This is also a perception that is frequently voiced by those outside the church.

Faith can indeed become a very pale or diluted form of the real thing. But a truly strong faith is something that is not static but a continually evolving process. When people hold on to religious concepts that are never challenged or subjected to critical enquiry their notion of faith typically becomes increasingly irrational and authoritarian. That is a dangerous position for faith to be in, as we are witnessing in the terrifying effects of blind, uncritical faith expressed around the world today. That is why it must continually be under scrutiny. Faith must be a focus for constant personal and communal reflection.

Authentic faith is always an adventure that does not depend on empirical proofs or a blind assent to any number of theoretical perspectives. It *is* a process and not a possession. It is something tangibly lived and experienced and the journey is something that we each make our own. To use the Ferris wheel analogy – it is what happens during the ride that counts – what happens on the journey will determine whether or not it becomes a personal, experiential faith.

If we look to the lives and good works of many of the great saints past and present we see that their faith was first and foremost, actually rooted firmly in *this* world. Sainthood was *not* generally a rejection or escape from the realities of the world. Holiness for them meant that they lived their lives *in* God and *with* God. But they began by saying 'Yes!' to life, all that it offers and all the challenges it could throw at them. Their lives will of course, continue to be an inspiration and a spiritual resource to guide us as we each live out our faith.

But how will others assess the quality and authenticity of our faith? Indeed how will we judge ourselves, if and when we engage in critical self-reflection? It certainly won't be limited to our knowledge of doctrine or formularies, the public affirmation of our beliefs, or the frequency and quality of our commitment to coming to church on Sundays. The answer must be: the quality of our whole lives is how people will judge faith in us. The test of faith *is* life itself.

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Readings: Isa. 65:17 – end Hebrews 11:32 – 12:2