

Our theme for this morning's meditation is "The reward of persevering in faith." What is faith? The writer of the letter to the Hebrews says, "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." This verse is in many ways a summary of what faith does: faith binds the believer securely to the reality of what he does not yet see, but for which he hopes. The confidence is not in one's own ability or faith but in the character and constancy of God himself. It is a deep belief that God will act in line with his character and will not step out of it even when circumstances seem to be showing just the opposite. For example in the case of Abraham, when God told him that he would have a son, the circumstances were just against him. He was 75 years old and Sarah was barren and therefore was in no position to bear a child. However, Abraham hoped against hope and this was considered as righteousness for him. Faith gives form and substance to things yet unrealised.

In Hebrews 11 there is a roll call of characters who exercised faith in God at crucial points. They hoped and knew that the living God was present through all their difficult situations, though they could not see him. Such implicit faith in God by these Old Testament characters from Abel to Rahab enabled them to achieve things which were thought to be unachievable. In the first six verses we have been given the example of Abel and of Enoch. Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. The writer of Hebrews shows that Abel's offering was of greater value not because of what he offered but how he offered. The next example he gives us is of Enoch. The writer of Hebrews shows that Enoch walked with God. In Genesis 5:22 and 24 the writer shows that Enoch walked faithfully with God and because of that God took him up without any death. Through all this the writer shows that, "Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." Similarly, we too are challenged to walk by faith believing in the promises of God, that he is able to save us completely and we are to walk with him faithfully.

In the gospel reading we see another incident of the faith of a Syrophenician woman. Jesus moves up into the vicinity of Tyre which was outside of Israel. He didn't want anybody to know that he had moved there. However, this Syrophenician woman had a little daughter who was possessed by an evil spirit and she came and fell at the feet of Jesus. She begged Jesus to drive out the demon out of her daughter.

Jesus' response to her seems to be really rude for he said, "Let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." The whole tone of the sentence is negative to the point of offensiveness, and seems as though Jesus has no intention of helping the woman. Jesus was telling her that his primary work was among the Jews and only then to reach out to the others. To refer to a human being as a 'dog' is deliberately offensive or dismissive. At best Jesus' response is a challenge to the woman to justify her request. Fortunately, she is equal to the challenge, and persists where many would have capitulated. (R.T. France)

Jesus is actually acting like a wise teacher who allows and incites his pupil to mount a victorious argument against the foil of his own reluctance. He functions in a manner as what we may call 'the devil's advocate' and is not disappointed to be defeated in the argument.

The woman refuses to take 'no' for an answer and comes up with remarkable wit and realism. She says even the dogs under the table get to eat the children's crumbs. Jesus is impressed with the answer because she perseveres in her faith knowing that Jesus has power to heal her daughter and therefore pushes Jesus to expand his boundaries to include the Gentiles as well. When Jesus hears this he says, "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. She received the reward of persevering in faith.

Many a time we too are called to persevere in our faith. Our circumstances may not give us any hope but we are to hold on to the character of Jesus knowing that his Word is backed up with his life. We can trust him and all his promises. We are therefore called to persevere in faith that we may receive our reward in due time.