

AND THE
WORD

WAS
MADE
FLESH

TO BELIEVE OR NOT TO BELIEVE -- THAT IS THE QUESTION

"I have not read much of anything lately except the Gospel according to St. John, which I found an entirely different thing from what I used to find it.

The popular misinterpretation of Christianity makes me sick!"

EDWARD ARLINGTON ROBINSON

There is a strange thing in the eighth chapter of St. John's Gospel. I am not referring to the account of the woman who committed adultery and was caught; some biblical scholars claim it is misplaced, dispute that it belongs in St. John's Gospel. I am not talking about that incident, although there is something strange about that too. In fact there is something strange about the whole Gospel, something mysterious, wonderful, profound. The magnificent Prologue sweeps us up into the eternal: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God; and the Word was God." Then he plunges us abruptly back to earth: "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. And we saw his glory—glory as of the only-begotten of the Father—full of grace and of truth."

The journey of the Word upon the earth begins. The Baptist witnesses to Him; a little group gathers around Him; He performs His first miracle in Cana at a wedding where His Mother and the little group went with Him to join in the festivities. "And he manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him." Then up to Jerusalem where He predicted His resurrection from the dead, but no one understood at the time what He was referring to. Yet, while He was at Jerusalem "many believed in his name, seeing the signs that he was working. But Jesus did not trust himself to them, in that he knew all men and because he had no need that anyone should bear witness concerning man, for he himself knew what was in man."

Nicodemus, one of the Pharisees, comes to Jesus at night and tells

Him that he is very confused about all these things that are going on and that people are talking about, but that he feels that Jesus must be from God. Our Lord tells him that he must be born again of water and the Spirit before he can begin to understand these mysterious things. Then He prophesies that He must be lifted up like Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so that those who believe in Him may not perish, but may have life everlasting.

The meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well and the promise of "living water" bring in more believers. "Now many of the Samaritans of that town believed in him because of the word of the woman who bore witness: He told me all that I have ever done. When therefore the Samaritans had come to him, they besought him to stay there; and he stayed two days. And far more believed because of his word. And they said to the woman: We no longer believe because of what thou hast said, for we have heard for ourselves and we know that this is in truth the Saviour of the world."

Returning to Cana in Galilee, Jesus is met by the royal official from Capernaum, who asks Him to cure his son. The official believes the word that Jesus speaks to him, his son is cured "and he himself believed and his whole household." Things certainly seem to be going very well, crowds are swarming to Jesus hailing Him as the Savior of the world, claiming to believe in Him. At least on the surface things seem to be going well.

But the drama continues. In Jerusalem again the man sick for thirty-eight years is cured and Jesus again makes claims to His divine origin, at the same time acknowledging His complete dependence in His humanity: "Amen, amen I say to you, the Son can do nothing of himself, but only what he sees the Father doing." And again: "Of myself I can do nothing. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just because I seek not my own will, but the will of him who sent me." And now Jesus tries to probe a little deeper into the psyches of those who claim that they believe in Him. "For the works which the Father has given me to accomplish, these very works that I do bear witness to me that the Father has sent me. But you have never heard his voice or seen his face. And you have not his word abiding in you, since you do not believe him whom he has sent. You search the Scriptures because in them you think you have life everlasting. And it is they that bear witness to me, yet you are not willing to come to me that you may have life."

In the sixth chapter the mystery deepens, the choices become more difficult, the chances for dissimulation fewer. After the feeding of the five

thousand with a few loaves and fishes, the crowd is greatly impressed; some of them come to Jesus, but He chides them a little. "You seek me not because you have seen signs, but because you have eaten of the loaves and have been filled. Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for that which endures unto life everlasting, which the Son of Man will give you." They do not understand this very well, so they ask a question: "What are we to do that we may perform the works of God?" Jesus answers: "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they ask for a sign, something like the manna that their fathers received in the desert. "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst. But I have told you that you have seen me and you do not believe." Then to make sure that there is no misunderstanding what He is saying: "As the living Father has sent me, and as I live because of the Father, so he who eats me, he also shall live because of me." The disciples find this a hard saying and begin to murmur. Jesus, knowing what they are thinking, insists: "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some among you who do not believe." Some among them can no longer keep up the pretext; they face the fact that they do not really believe that His words are spirit and life, that they live because of Him. Psychologically, they cannot accept the fact of their dependence upon Him. This is the moment of truth; they turn back and no longer go about with Him.

The mystery deepens, but the issues become clearer. Either they must accept the mystery, believe that He is God, believe that they live because of Him, that He is their life, that of themselves they can do nothing just as the Son of Himself can do nothing but has everything from the Father, either accept all this, or they cannot be His disciples. At least some have the courage to face the truth in themselves; they leave Him and go their way.

Then Jesus asks the twelve if they too will go away, and Peter, speaking for them, makes his magnificent profession of faith: "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of everlasting life and we have come to believe and to know that thou art the Christ, the Son of God." Now at last it seems that all is well. At least there are some who really believe in Him, know that He is the Christ, the Son of God, accept the implications of what this means.

But in the very next chapter, the seventh, the same problem looms up. Some of the brethren urge Jesus to go up to Jerusalem to manifest Himself to His disciples, and as St. John tells us: "For not even his

brethren believed in him." Jesus does go up to Jerusalem privately and teaches again in the temple and tells them why they do not really believe in Him. "You both know me and know where I am from. Yet I have not come of myself, but he is true who has sent me, whom you do not know." At this point, on the last great day of the feast, Jesus stands and cries out: "If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture says: From within him there shall flow rivers of living water."

This brings us to the strange events in the eighth chapter that started our discussion. "Jesus therefore said to the Jews who had *come to believe in him*: If you abide in my word, you shall be my disciples indeed, and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. . . . If therefore the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. . . . I know that you are the children of Abraham, but you seek to kill me because my word takes no hold among you. . . . Why do you not understand my speech? Because you cannot listen to my word. Because I speak the truth *you do not believe me*."

The Jews whom the Gospel says "*had come to believe in him*" are told in unmistakable language by Jesus Himself "*you do not believe me*." And why do they not believe? "Because I speak the truth." They cannot accept the truth; it is too painful. They cannot really believe that of themselves they can do nothing, that they are helpless in themselves. They cannot face the fact that they are creatures and not gods, that salvation is something given, that they cannot save themselves. They are willing to admit that they need the help of a Savior to help them save themselves, but not willing to admit that they need a Savior to save them from themselves. Christ tells them: "If therefore the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." They want to free themselves. To depend totally on Christ seems like psychological suicide to them; they prefer to cling to their own egos, their pre-conceived notions, protect that one last pocket of self from the Light of Truth. Christ demands that they strip away the last blind of self-deception and face the truth. This they cannot do. But to believe in Jesus, to have faith in Him, means adhering to the truth, but the Truth is the Person of the Word incarnate. To believe in Jesus is to know that He is the Son of God sent by the Father to save us; it is to confess His divinity and our creatureliness and dependence upon Him. It is possible, as the would-be disciples have done, to adhere to the truth with one part of the mind and yet have the whole personality remain in darkness. But it is not possible to give oneself

wholly in faith, to really believe and yet remain in darkness, still masking some of the truth from oneself.

What seems like psychological suicide to them is really the beginning of a new and fuller life. They forget that our Lord told them that the truth would make them free, not dead; that once freed from the shackles of self, God's own life can begin to operate within them. They will not be left in their helpless condition, in their despairing state. Christ repeatedly urges them, once they have admitted the truth of their condition, once freed from the bonds of self-deception, "*come to me that you may have life.*" "So he who eats me, he shall *live* because of me." "If anyone thirst, let him *come to me and drink.*" Far from committing psychological suicide, they will begin to come alive for the first time, begin to live the new and marvelous life of the children of God, and "from within him there shall flow rivers of living water."

To believe Christ, to be His disciples, does mean that we give intellectual assent to the truth of His divinity, but it also means that we assent to the implications of this truth. It means that we accept our own condition as human, needy, dependent, prone to self-deception. It means that we see ourselves as we really are, accept our condition, then be open to receive the Son of God, to come to Him, follow Him, walk in His light, remain in Him, to adhere with one's whole being to the Person Jesus Christ.

Faith is not just an intellectual judgment, it is a personal commitment. To give our belief, our faith to Christ is to give ourselves to Christ, to put ourselves completely in His hands, to trust Him absolutely. It is to submit our darkness to His light, our need to His fullness, our dead-in-sin selves to His life. To be a disciple of Christ, a follower of His, like Him, is to experience the truth of what He told us: "Without me you can do nothing," just as He said of Himself in His human condition: "Of myself I can do nothing."

—John Dominic Campbell, O.P.