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“Believing Is Seeing”

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Text: “And He did not work many miracles there: such was their want of faith.” St. Matthew 13:58

If an unbeliever asks, “How does one become a believer?” he is likely to be told that the way into faith is by having faith. And that answer is a problem for the questioner for it seems to be no answer at all. He may reply that it is not like that in any other region of thought or experience. If in any other discipline he asks how he is to believe, he is shown the evidence. He sees, understands, and if the evidence is compelling, is convinced by it. But apparently it is not like that in religion. To become a believer, it seems, is not to be convinced by the strength of the evidence, but to possess enough faith to trust the evidence to be true. But what sort of evidence is it that has to be trusted to be true? Real evidence is not trusted to be true but convinces us of its truth. The unbeliever might then begin to suspect that faith is nothing more or better than credulity, and that Christians are not only tender of heart but a little soft in the head. Faith is brought in because the evidence is weak. The unbeliever becomes convinced that Christians do not think as clearly or as rigorously as unbelievers do. Isn't it interesting that “The Rationalist Press” was the name chosen for the publishing enterprise of those who were unsympathetic to religion, suggesting, of course, that religion is less rational than unbelief, and that all the clear, hard thinking is done by those who do not believe.

As a result, some unbelievers are not only confident in their unbelief, but superior, condescending, even arrogant. They dismiss faith as wishful thinking. Christians are those who

want to believe so badly that they will believe anything. But not the unbelievers! They are the ones who think honestly, courageously, objectively, and are persuaded only by evidence. After all, "seeing is believing", isn't it? So they come to the conclusion that the little boy was right who was alleged to have said, "Faith means believing what you know isn't true."

When unbelievers begin to talk like that, and to adopt that attitude, what are we going to say to them? And here we must remember that we are contending, not only with the unbeliever outside us, but with the unbeliever within us. There are times, surely, when we question the grounds of our own belief and ask whether we are self-deceived because we want to believe.

I do not know what you would say in reply to the unbeliever outside us and within us; but given the opportunity, I know what I should like to say. I should reply, "Affirm, if you wish, that seeing is believing, but if you do you must recognize the implications of what you say, and you must be prepared to live with them. If you are not aware of them, then let me tell you what they are; let me draw them out for you and allow you to discover whether or not you wish to affirm them."

I. Here is the first: *Declare, if you wish, that seeing is believing, but if you do then you must not expect to be a scientist; certainly not a great one.*

Now that may seem a strange assertion to make, for surely the very heart of the scientific method is to observe, and to be persuaded by what we see. In the hard sciences, if anywhere, seeing is believing. That is how most people think of scientists; it is the view commonly held of them. But it is a view that does them much less than justice. Scientists have much more imagination than that, and scientific endeavor is far more creative than that.

For example, one of the most perceptive newspaper columnists in this country informs us that a friend of his who is a scientist tells him that in this age of journalism, of the superficial judgment, the easy conclusion and the glib comment, it is the scientist who is saying that reality is not what it appears to be. The superficial view may be acceptable in journalism, but it will not do in science. In science, if we believe what we see, our belief will often be false, or at the very least, misleading. The scientist declares astonishing things, telling us that

matter is really energy, that light is subject to gravity, that if we increase the speed of an object we reduce the passage of its time. This sounds like pure fantasy, and yet this is what scientists believe to be true. It is the scientist who tells us not only that reality is queerer than we suppose, but that it is queerer than we can suppose. It reaches not only beyond the limits of our sight but further than our imagination can reach.

Here is another scientist who tells us that the protons, neutrons and electrons which are basic stuff of matter have never been seen or heard or touched by anyone. How do we know they are there? We know that these entities exist only because they can be held together in a meaningful and useful pattern. But the pattern is not something to be seen for it is itself a mental concept.

Another scientist reminds us that when we examine the often unexamined presuppositions of science, the basic beliefs on which the whole scientific enterprise is founded and which make it possible, we are forced to move beyond science into philosophy and even religion. For example, when a scientist tells me dogmatically that the only way to know anything is the scientific way, I immediately want to ask him whether the statement he has just made is itself a scientific statement. It sounds dangerously like a philosophical one to me. But if it is, then the scientist who makes it has disproved his own case. To make his arrogant assertion he must move beyond a scientific way of knowing to a different way of knowing so that he finds himself among the philosophers and even the poets and mystics!

Here is another scientist who tells us that while there are scientists who go about picking up facts, little bits of information, and who are unimaginative enough to think that having done so they have exhausted their discipline, the great scientists are not like that. She calls the scientists who will believe only what they can see the "stamp collectors" of science, and immediately apologizes to all stamp collectors. Science, she tells us, has to do not merely with facts, with things that are seen, but with *meaning*. The scientific enterprise is impossible without imagination, vision, creativity. The dull ones are the "stamp collectors", the great ones have much in common with creative artists.

Einstein tells us that the work of the scientist begins, not in anything that can be seen but in a certain attitude. It begins in a sense of wonder. He tells us that without a sense of wonder we might as well be dead, for it is the beginning of all true art and science. In other words astronomy did not begin when an astronomer looked at the night sky through a telescope; it began when a little child said, "Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are!"

Don't miss the point! It is a very simple one. If you are prepared to believe only what you see, then you will not believe very much, and much of what you do believe will be mistaken. You will not see or understand enough to be a scientist.

II. Here is my second assertion. *Believe, if you wish, that seeing is believing, but if you do you must not expect to be a creative artist.*

We have been speaking of creative scientists, now we must speak of creative artists. Seeing is believing? But as soon as we say it the writer, or painter, or composer will reply that there isn't anything to see! When they begin their work, all they have is a box of colors, a pen, a blank page, a lined manuscript. That is all. There is nothing for them to see. Everything waits for them to bring into being something that cannot be seen until it is created; something that was not there to be seen until they created it.

You cannot see a fire in the bones, or an inner vision, or an impulse of the heart, or an insight of the mind, or a hint or intimation that has to be worked for before it is possessed and may easily be lost at any moment. There is nothing for artists to see, for their whole undertaking is an adventure in discovery, to bring into being something that was not there before. And what they bring into existence may be as astonishing and unexpected to the artists as it is to those who see their paintings, or read their book, or hear their music. Robert Frost tells us quite simply that if there is no surprise for the writer, there can be no surprise for the reader.

Towards the end of his life, Hemingway told a man who had come to interview him that when he wrote *The Old Man And The Sea*, a story in which a great fish comes circling the boat and sniffing the bait, that he, the author, did not know whether or not it would take the bait. Flannery O'Connor tells

us that she did not know how one of her most famous stories would end. She had to discover how it would end as she wrote it. C. Day Lewis, the late Poet Laureate, declares that "Verse is not the expression of truth in poetry. Verse is the discovery of truth in poetry."

In our own poor way we know this, for we have all discovered at one time or other that in good conversation we hit upon truth in ourselves that we didn't know was there. We were astonished when it happened and wondered where it came from. It was not that we knew it, and then stated it. It was that we did not know it *until* we stated it. The thought came in the words and astonished us. It was Robert Frost who spoke of the joy of "remembering something I didn't know I knew." We all know something of that. Conversation is not always about things we know. At its best it is the discovery of truth we didn't know.

Again, don't miss the point. Say, if you wish, that seeing is believing, but if you do, you must realize that you will never be a creative artist, for the creative artist creates something that isn't there to be seen.

III. Here is a third thing to notice: *Say, if you wish, that seeing is believing, but if you do then get ready for some very superficial relationships because they are the only sort you will be capable of having or sustaining.*

You know how it is that when Jack and Jill fall in love all the old gossips at their bridge parties say to one another, "I don't know what he sees in her!" or, "I don't know what she sees in him!" They never said a truer word; they don't know. But Jack knows! He finds in his beloved the fulfillment of all his dreams of loveliness; and she, looking at him, thinks there is no one else like him in the whole world. Now who is right? Do the old gossips have the truth of the matter, or do Jack and Jill? Are the lovers given to excess in their claims, or are the gossips deficient in their view?

William James, you will remember, considered the question, and there was no doubt about his answer. It is the lovers who are closer to the truth of things. Do you know why? Because, says William James, love, faith, trust and generosity will reveal what cynicism, suspicion, hatred and fear will never discover.

Who knows you best? There is no doubt that the people who love you do. To whom do you respond? To the people who

trust you. Let me tell you that if you do not trust me you will never know me, because if you do not care for me I am not going to show you anything that I really care about. Trust is the condition of knowledge, isn't it? You discovered that at that dreadful party you went to once. Don't you remember? You felt that everyone was critical, that they were watching you to see how you behaved and if you would make any mistakes. Ten minutes after you arrived you were asking yourself why you had come. Everything you said sounded trite and superficial. Everything you did seemed awkward and clumsy. Good thoughts which your friends had appreciated seemed stupid in this hostile company. Jokes your friends thought were funny died on your lips and won no laughter from anyone, only embarrassment from you. And all the lightsomeness and joy went out of you, the springs of humor dried up, and you could not be yourself. And you remembered that in company where you are known and loved you are at ease, and all the juices of personality flow, and all the colors of character are revealed and cherished. Those who love us enable us to be our true selves. These are the people who know us best, for their love is their power of appreciation and understanding, and we feel safe enough with them to allow them to know us, and we are not intimidated in their presence.

It is like that with congregations. I have a friend who is one of the greatest preachers in the English-speaking world, yet he preached once in a church and had a dreadful time. It was heavy going from beginning to end. He could make nothing of it. When he had finished he felt a total failure. He talked to a Scottish friend about it. He, too, was one of the world's great preachers. He asked him if he had ever preached in that church, and how his sermon had gone over. His friend replied that he had preached to that congregation ten years earlier and not only remembered it, but was still trying to get the chill of it out of his bones! The coldness of the congregation was such that all warmth, spontaneity and inspiration in the preacher froze. It is said that great preachers make great congregations. Perhaps they do. But the deeper truth is that great congregations make great preachers. A congregation by its attentiveness, responsiveness and warmth can elevate every preacher and make them great. And another congregation by its coolness and lack of response can discourage every preacher and drive them to despair.

A young minister once told me that when he first arrived at his new church, the people had obviously decided that they would wait to see what he was like before making up their minds whether or not to welcome him. It sounds reasonable. Wait and see and then decide. It *sounds* reasonable, but it doesn't work. And it doesn't work because "what he is like" will depend on how he is received; whether he is welcomed with trust and openness or met by suspicion and coldness. Without their welcome he felt rejected and miserable. When he had been there six months one member of the congregation said to him, "You haven't made any mistakes—yet!" So he spent an unhappy two years trying to prove himself, and finally left, discouraged and sad. If only they had given him their trust first, they would have made possible a deep, rich ministry. And a further sadness is that people who are like that have no awareness of what they do to others, or how greatly they impoverish their own lives. If the trust comes first it makes everything possible. If it is withheld, little can be done. Even our Lord could do nothing without it. We read that in one region of the country in which He travelled, "He could do no mighty work there because of their unbelief." Not even He could overcome their suspicion and distrust!

Mind you, there is a place for caution and reserve, for some people are dishonest and we are sometimes deceived. But the place of suspicion is surely secondary. If we *begin* by being suspicious of everyone and everything, it is not a sign of wisdom but of sickness. There is time for suspicion when our experience so instructs us. But we don't begin with it. If we do, we may never get beyond it.

Again, don't miss the point! If you wait to see before you believe, you won't see much, and deep relationships will pass you by. Assert if you will that seeing is believing, but if you do, then you will never be a scientist, you will never be a creative artist, you will never enjoy deep personal relationships. Here is the last implication of your view.

IV. *Say, if you wish, that seeing is believing, but if you do you will never be a leader.*

Some have an idea of leadership that says, "Prove to me that what you are proposing cannot fail and when you have done so, I will give you my support." My answer to that idea

is that by the time I can prove that my proposal cannot fail I do not need their support. The critical time is over. To be a leader you have to act before you can prove that what you are proposing cannot fail. The proof comes later, not sooner. Without the event there can be no proof.

People who talk like that are like the second-rate bank manager who is eager to lend me money so long as I can demonstrate that I don't need it. A leader is not one who has been persuaded that a great undertaking cannot fail. A leader is one who believes it into reality. Robert Frost said of the love between his wife and himself that it was "a love that was believed into fulfillment."

Do you remember the words Ted Kennedy used at his brother Robert's funeral? They were Robert's favorite words: "Some people look at things as they are and ask why? I dream of things that never were and ask, why not?" Now that is leadership. But the believing comes first. Without it there is nothing to be fulfilled!

Four things! Now let me wrap them all up for you. Let me tell you what I have been saying. I have been saying that faith is not believing what you know isn't true, but is itself the condition of sight. It is all expressed splendidly by St. Augustine: "To have faith is to believe what you cannot see, and the reward of faith is to see what you believe."

One day, when I lived in Sarnia, I drove sixty miles to London, Ontario, and went to the cinema. I was a little annoyed because the image on the screen was out of focus. So I complained to one of the attendants who went off and tried hard to improve the picture, but with little success. Then, driving home, I noticed that some of the highway signs were out of focus, and there was nobody to complain to about them. Instead, I went to see my dear friend Dr. Biehn who smiled, tested my eyes and said, "It's just your age. You need glasses." So he gave them to me. And now I can see a sharp image in the cinema and on the highway.

What if faith is the very condition of sight, a way of bringing into focus what is there waiting to be seen! It is not that seeing is believing, but that believing is seeing! When I invite you to have faith, I am not asking you to sell out all your intellectual integrity. Who would find any pleasure in that? Should we

think, by doing so, to please the God who made us able to think clearly and who loves truth in our inward parts? When I exhort you to have faith I am appealing to the deepest part of your humanity. You are not genuinely human without it. It is not simply that without faith you will not know God; it is that without faith you won't know anybody or anything worth knowing.

So if our Lord stands here this morning, as indeed He does, and says, "Have faith!" to do so will not diminish you, it will elevate you. If you have it to give, and if He is worthy to receive it, what is there left for you to do but to give it to Him? Give it to Him! Just a tiny little bit, small as a mustard seed, will do. Give Him that, and you will be astonished at what He will do with it, and where it will lead you, and what it will show you.