

Trust

Sermon by Nigel Cooper

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Romans 4: 1-5

Mark 9: 17-27

Πιστις: trust, faith, loyalty. I regret that William Tyndale selected on almost all occasions to translate the word as faith or believe when the core meaning of Pistis is trust.

Our society is very confused over trust. Hear are a few illustrations.

Last year, when canvassing for Vote Climate, I found near universal lack of trust in politicians – to my mind, deservedly so. Yet I believe we get the politicians we deserve. In the privacy of the polling booth we vote for what we want, and so politicians have to promise this, even if they know they cannot deliver yet that then frees them to do whatever they want when in office.

Contrast this lack of trust with the trust in conspiracy theories and those who promote them, however implausible either the people or the theories are. I suppose part of the dynamic here is loyalty to a group in order to have a sense of belonging and so worth.

Are both the lack of trust and the hyper-trust symptoms of an increasingly unequal society with both a deteriorating standard of living for most people and an equivalent loss of power to change things? And with that loss of power, have we been infantilised?

Turning to shopping, I note the extent of our trust in companies selling us things. So strong are our desires, partially driven by advertising, that we are able to massage our ethical commitments through the operation of Don't ask; don't tell. Greenwash and other nice stories told by companies help us feel good, while we ignore the contrary in plain sight. A few years ago I had to buy a pair of trainers at a supermarket. On the shelf they were priced £25, which I thought ridiculous for the resources consumed and the labour expended. When I went to the self-checkout the price came up as £8. I called the person over to check if there had been a mistake. "No," I was told. But, of course, there had been a profound misvaluation which I conspired with in buying them; bad faith on my part.

Another time I was debating via email with someone who denied anthropogenic climate change. It forced me to get into the detail of the scientific arguments (even though that is no way to change the mind of a sceptic). I discovered that the arguments are very robust compared with much environmental science. I also discovered that there were two climate sceptics in the conversation, my friend and me. I believed the science, but I was no more acting on it than he was. I was not really trusting it as I did not want to confront the way I needed – and still need – to change my life.

Then there is the massive distrust of the church over sex abuse. Of course, one can never have 'it will never happen again', but we do expect good leadership and the archbishops have let us down. There is the double betrayal of victims and survivors on the one hand and the rest of the church on the other. I sense a certain glee amongst newspapers, for instance, at the opportunity to pull the church down, to undermine its call to righteousness and faith, however compromised by its own life that may be.

Does the root of this confusion lie in not trusting ourselves; not discerning the difference between the call of our spirit deep within from the shallow temptations of our addictive desires?

Might this explain how we are not using our antennae to identify the chancers and snake-oil salesmen, but fall for their enticements? How we don't question the easy answers we want to hear, that will confirm our prejudices? How we cling to externally given certainties provided by others rather than face as adults the inevitability of doubt? How we ignore the still small voice that nudges us to recognise the strength of goodness, truth and beauty?

And this leads my thoughts to God.

Is faith in God a matter of believing nine impossible things before breakfast, as is portrayed by the New Atheists?

Both the ancients and ourselves often long for a God who is a fixer of our problems, especially when we are in deep trouble – or even, dare I say, when we are hoping for a parking place. I am thinking of the despair of the Psalmist (44.9), "You have not gone out with our armies!" Nevertheless, the religious journey of humankind leads away from a fixer God to an anchor of value, of ineradicable, eternal value. The spiritual practices of a religion, its liturgy and creeds, for example, are scaffold for our exploration and search. They are most properly subject to scepticism and to development as our explorations extend. The certainty, the call to faith, lies in the commitment to this search.

Fundamental to this approach is loyalty to value. And we discover that value is worthy of our trust through life. We discover it in our journey within and in our observations without. We observe people and aspects of nature that instantiate value. We develop the spiritual practice of discernment, gradually coming to know ourselves and the truth about ourselves.

I have come to believe – and I use this word advisably, referring both to my discovery and my commitment to it – I believe in the Transcendentals of Being, Goodness, Truth and Beauty, the Unity of Being, and of very Being Beingself, and lying behind all of which is, in St Thomas Aquinas's words, What People Call God. But more than this, I believe in the distinctive Christian emphasis on the relational dynamics that are summed up in the three Theological Virtues of Faith, Hope and Love. These should be our attitudes towards the Transcendentals, trusting them, grounding our hope in them, loving them. Even more importantly, I believe that these three are how God, for want of a better word, is towards us.

God believes in us, trusts us, lets us be our true selves. God remains loyal to us.

God hopes in us, foresees and enables our transformation, our ever deepening goodness and glory.

God loves us, is for us, unites with us (even more than lovers do). God gives Godself for us, sacrificing the divine life to enable us to live and enabling us to offer our lives for others and for truth.

Wherever they come from, all the distrusts, the confusions, the self-deceptions that I began with cataloguing are mere distractions from this journey of trust.

Whatever your religious beliefs, I think we are all on this journey of trust, though we may be moving back and forth along it. Just notice, for instance, how much you do already trust. I am perpetually fascinated by the way we sit on chairs, nonchalantly confident they will keep us up – rather rashly in this chapel as the chairs do have a tendency to fall apart! Or the way we trust that the sun will rise tomorrow, even if cloud prevents us seeing it. Or that, often, I hope, the way we feel life is worth living. Then you might ask yourself, “Why is life worth living?” Is it what we possess? Of course not, we take nothing into this world and we take nothing out. Is it acclaim by others? No, just think of a Donald Trump and cry over the inner emptiness of such a person. Is it moments of adrenalin? There is the morning after. Is it a successful career? No one on their deathbed thinks, “If only I had spent more time at the office.”

All these things can be vehicles of what makes life worth living, such as things of beauty, the affection of friends, the joy of ecstasy. But they are worthwhile for what they carry that is of true and lasting worth. We can ask ourselves, “How can I shift from a shallower life dominated by wants to a deeper desire for where true joys are to be found? How do I trust more in the things that are of lasting value?” That may or may not lead you to formulate this as God and to use and value the scaffolding of the church.

In this journey, particularly in its most painful moments, we may identify with the father of the epileptic boy in the gospel story. We might say in our words, “[God, or your own expletive of awareness such as the F word] I do actually trust, at least a bit, but I need rescuing from my distrust.” In the father’s anguish for his son, he cried out, “Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief!” Well, that’s where I am, at any rate.