

Homily for February 25th 2018
“People of Little Faith in the Great God”

There was a woman in a community who was well known for her simple faith and great calm in the midst of many trials. Another woman who had never met her but had heard of her came to visit one day. "I must find out the secret of her calm, happy life," she thought to herself.

As she met her she said: "So you are the woman with the great faith I've heard so much about."

"No," came the reply. "I am not the woman with the great faith, but I am the woman with the little faith in the great God."

This is the theme on display in today's reading from Genesis. Abraham was a person of little faith in the Great God.

So what is faith? St Thomas Aquinas gave us the classic theological definition of faith. Listen to what he wrote:

“Faith is the act of the intellect when it assents to divine truth under the influence of the will moved by God through grace”¹

Let me unpack this.

Faith is the act of the intellect –What is our intellect? It is the faculty we use in order to understand the world in which we live so we can live purposeful of meaningful lives. Think of this example. In order to make a chocolate cake, your intellect has to understand the recipe, take the appropriate steps in mixing the ingredients, cook it, cool, it, ice it and serve in with ice cream. What a delicious way to use one's intellect.

Another word for intellect is reason. We may for instance look at three or four recipes before making our cake, as to reason which will make the most satisfying dessert.

In the act of faith, the intellect is paramount but the object we are applying it to is far more important than a cake recipe.

So let's continue with our definition:

Faith is the act of the intellect when it assents to divine truth. So now the intellect is being exercised in relation to divine truth so that we can give our yes to what God has revealed to us in Holy Scripture and how this is interpreted by the Church. The person of faith understands therefore that our intellect will become fully alive and active when we not only give our assent to divine truth but act on what that truth declares to us, which is the next part of the definition.

¹ Hahn, S. (Ed.). (2009). In [Catholic Bible Dictionary](#) (pp. 277–278). New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday.

“Faith is the act of the intellect when it assents to divine truth under the influence of the will moved by God.”

The will is the interior faculty given to us by God where we come to a decision so that we will now act.

Think again of my chocolate cake, which isn't the best example to use during Lent, I can have made a decision about the best recipe and read it over and over again, thinking to myself, that will be the best cake ever! But my will has to then take the step of acting by making the recipe and baking the cake.

How much more so when it comes to our need to act upon what God has shown us by Divine Truth. The will is moved by God to act.

So let me read the definition one more time.

“Faith is the act of the intellect when it assents to divine truth under the influence of the will moved by God through grace”

The last two words in this definition are key: ‘through grace’. Grace is the gift of God’s loving favour shown to us in Jesus through the mediation of the Church and her sacraments. As we live a life rooted in grace our intellect will have a heightened ability to give our assent to divine truth as we can willingly choose to live according to God’s Revelation.

Okay, now let me apply this to our reading from Genesis. Here is one of the most perplexing passages of the Old Testament. After 25 years of waiting for the birth of Isaac, the child is born and is now a young adult. And God says to Abraham, okay now take your only son because I want you to sacrifice him on Mount Moriah. The remarkable thing is that Abraham gives his assent to this Divine Truth under the influence of his will moved by God through grace. We see in this story complete trust on the part of Abraham and when Isaac asks the question, where is the animal for the sacrifice, Abraham says, trust God, he will provide.

What a test. But one that only makes sense in light of Jesus because of the parallels with his life. Without Jesus it is an enigma.

First parallel with Christ: Abraham offers his only beloved son as a sacrifice. Well that parallels the heavenly father offering his only beloved son, Christ.

Second, the only beloved son, Isaac in this case, carries the wood of his own sacrifice up the mountain and then is laid down on the wood to become a sacrifice. Well this should make you think of the crucifixion, right, where Jesus carries the wood of his own sacrifice up the mountain to Golgatha in order to be laid on that wood as a sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Third, also look at the effects of this sacrifice. What does God say to Abraham? Because you've done this, all the nations of the world are going to be blessed through you because of what you

were willing to do. Well when does that take place? Well that's going to happen at the cross, when Christ ascends the wood of the cross and dies on the cross.

One of the first things that's going to happen is the conversion of the Gentile Centurion, who's going to say surely this man was the son of God, and he's going to be the kind of first-fruits of the rest of the whole world coming to recognize Jesus as the Messiah and the son of God. The other thing here, you might notice is that when Isaac is saved from being sacrificed, God provides the substitute of a ram caught in a thicket, a thorn bush, by his horns.

Many of the ancient church fathers saw that as a type of Christ too, because they saw Christ as the ram. The ram was a symbol for kings and kingship like David. So Christ is like that, the royal king who wears a crown made out of thorns. So just as the ram is caught by its horns in a thorn bush, so Christ wears a crown of thorns and he's going to be the substitute, he's going to take Isaac's place, in a sense, so that he will lay down his life in sacrifice so that the world might be blessed.

And then last but certainly not least, if you have any doubts about all of that, you've got to look at the mountain. In Genesis 22, it makes clear that the place where Isaac is sacrificed is Mount Mori'ah. Well later on in the Bible, in 2 Chronicles 3:1, we have one other reference to Mori'ah in the Old Testament, and it's important because it says that King Solomon "began to build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Mori'ah." In other words, Abraham offers his beloved son Isaac on the same mountain that Jesus, the beloved son of the Father, is going to lay down his life for the sins of the world. So there's a geographical connection.

Here is the application I want to make for us. To give our assent to Divine Truth and to then act on it, might not make everything clear to us. Although Isaac was spared Abraham never knew in this life the full implications of what the events of that day would mean as anticipating the Cross.

The same was true with Peter, James and John as they journeyed with Jesus to the place where he was transfigured. At the time they didn't fully understand what was going on. What they did hear was the voice of the Father saying "Listen to my son" In other words give your assent to his divine truth so that in time you will be moved by grace to live for Jesus with a conviction that at present you cannot even perceive. The same thing can happen for us.

20 years ago St. John Paul II penned an encyclical called "Faith and Reason". In it he wrote:

The Church has always considered the act of entrusting oneself to God to be a moment of fundamental decision which engages the whole person.

It engages the whole person because both the intellect and will are involved so like Abraham we can act. Notice St John Paul says this is the fundamental decision. He goes on to write:

Men and women can accomplish no more important act in their lives than the act of faith;

*it is here that freedom reaches the certainty of truth and chooses to live in that truth.*²

This is what happens when we give our assent to Divine Truth. We discover freedom as we learn to entrust ourselves to God, when like Abraham we give our assent to divine truth so that are will moved by God can discover that our faith is enough.

Little faith in the great God made all the difference in Abraham's life, Peter, James and John's lives, in the woman who introduced this homily and in your life and mine.

St Thomas Aquinas pray for us that we might discover more fully what you meant when you wrote:

“Faith is the act of the intellect when it assents to divine truth under the influence of the will moved by God through grace”

² John Paul II. (1998). [*Fides et Ratio*](#). Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.