

1. *Faith is Obedience*

Seeing the crowds . . . He opened His mouth and taught them.

Matthew 5:1-2

Faith as experience?

There was a time when faith was a given. Everyone knew that a person ought to believe. For the most part it was clear what a person was supposed to believe and how he was supposed to live. Unbelief became associated with underdeveloped peoples. An un-Christian life was a barbarian one.

That time is now past. Faith is still tolerated, but why should faith be considered any better than unbelief? Living a Christian life is permissible but only as a private matter: public life has become neutral, dechristianized.

Many people today experience faith as a neutral matter too. Within Christianity emphasis is shifting more and more towards the *experience* of faith. If the experience of faith is real and personal, a person can believe anything he wants. Attention in the Christian life moves from the fixed norms to personal choice and personal responsibility. The question of how something is viewed or experienced becomes more important than the question of what it is or ought to be.

As a matter of course the Christian faith also loses its exclusive character. Why shouldn't Muslims, Jews and Buddhists have genuine faith-experiences too? Missionary work aiming at conversion has been traded in for dialogue which leads to understanding.

For many in the 20th Century a shared faith means: sharing experiences of faith. Faith is free, isn't it? In this way faith becomes neutral. The only surviving heresy is the demand that others believe a particular doctrine and comply to a certain lifestyle. Doesn't the very nature of faith exclude every kind of authority, whether it be the authority of a church, a confession or a Bible? One clear issue appears to have survived in our obscure and vague era: faith is free.

Faith as obedience

The New Testament speaks of faith in a different way. In his first epistle the Apostle Peter talks about obeying the truth (1:22), and he is not the only one. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, says that the apostles have been sent out to call all the nations to obedience to the faith (15:18, 1:5, 16:26). The word obedience indicates that faith is not a neutral matter: believing means submitting.

We cannot say that a later development shows up here in which the frozen doctrine of the apostles smothers Jesus' spontaneous gospel of love. Jesus Himself taught them that believing is the same thing as obeying, even unto death. When Jesus sent the 12 disciples out for the first time during His earthly ministry, He gave them a set of instructions for believers: "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it." (Matthew 10:37-39) Believing has more to do with the behavior of a loyal soldier who is ready to die for his king than with the reports and experiences of an observer at the front. The apostles are in perfect harmony with their Master when they call faith obedience.

Jesus' own appearance on earth let this be felt too. Right from the very beginning.

All kinds of people

After Herod Antipas imprisoned John the Baptist, his preaching was continued by Jesus. It started in Galilee, in the North of Palestine. He addressed Himself to the whole people of Israel. His message was meant for everyone, and this included the miraculous healings. Matthew writes that "Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people," (4:23). Inevitably, people poured in from every direction to experience Jesus' work, sometimes in their own bodies. Soon masses of people from the whole of Palestine were following after Him. Matthew watches as they stream forth from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and from beyond the Jordan (4:25). Jesus isn't for a hand full of peo-

ple or for certain character-types. He seeks the nation, humanity. Faith is something for everyone.

Once the crowds have come together Jesus appears to expect something from them. They have been attracted by the experience of His miracles. Now He pulls them along in His wake. Seeing the crowds arriving, He went ahead of them to the mountain. Matthew assumes that his readers already know that Jesus had a particular mountain retreat (5:1). This mountain, situated northeast of the Sea of Galilee, served as His base. To Him and His disciples this was *the* mountain: Jesus' well-known mountain. The mountain is not new. New, however, is that Jesus' base now becomes the meeting place for the people of Israel. With Jesus they cannot remain neutral. He precedes them as guide and is leading them somewhere.

The journey is striking. Matthew says that He went up on a mountainside(5:1). Translators often write that Jesus climbed up the mountain, but that is not the case at all. Matthew indicates that Jesus went up to the mountain in the same way that pilgrims went up to Jerusalem each year. Traveling together to the city is self-evident. The temple is located there, isn't it? But why would anyone take crowds from the whole of Israel up to a mountain: does Jesus have more to offer there than at the earthly Jerusalem? At the beginning of His ministry Jesus is already focusing all sorts of people's attention on a destination towards which they all have to follow Him obediently. Whoever comes to Jesus, notices that He takes control of the direction of life!

Wanted: disciples

Having arrived at the mountain the crowds are not allowed to remain neutral. They have begun to follow and now they must become disciples. Jesus sits down in the manner of a teacher in Israel and Matthew tells that His disciples come to Him (5:1). Solemnly and officially the teaching begins. Matthew chooses almost ceremonious words to indicate that: "And He opened His mouth and taught them, saying" (5:2).

This instruction is meant for all kinds of people. The multitude has not been brought along in vain. Jesus provides His teaching for them (Matthew 7:29). It isn't instruction for a select few. At the same time the lesson-plan very plainly indicates that no neutral, open-air gathering is being held either. The disciples are standing or sitting in front of Him for a purpose:

Jesus wants to be surrounded by followers and every listener must learn how to be or become a good disciple.

Luke's Gospel contains a fairly short summary of the Sermon on the Mount (6:20-49). Most striking is Luke's focus on the parts of Jesus' teaching which directly concern the requirements for a disciple. Luke has apparently trimmed down the Sermon on the Mount in order to clearly show Theophilus and other readers that it is the rule of learning to live the Christian life. Matthew provides a more complete text. He too records all sorts of passages in which Jesus directly speaks to the Jews of His day. Still, Matthew's rendering demonstrates that the whole sermon's theme is how to be a disciple of Jesus. It is a lesson in learning how to follow. Faith is not neutral. Believers can only remain erect by hearing Jesus' words and by doing them (Matthew 7:24). All sorts of different people have to learn one single kind of obedience. For that reason Jesus took them up to the mountain.

The Sermon on the Mount's significance can certainly be seen in the preparations of the night before. Luke (6:12-19) tells that Jesus remained awake between the arrival at the mountain and the preaching of the sermon. It is the only time that we read about a whole night filled with prayer. Jesus began to preach His commands only after having spent hours on His knees pleading with the Father for the people. Early the next morning He designated twelve as disciples who would always remain with Him. In this way the circle of followers became a kind of nation with a council of twelve. The blueprints for a new people, gathered around Jesus, begin to take shape, and after that Jesus descends to a level place by the mountain in order to heal the sick and to deliver His speech to the disciples and listeners. Even the preparations show that Jesus intends to take all these people into service for a great future. The faith-experience surrounding the healings is supposed to be translated into faith-obedience to Jesus' commands.

God's authority

Familiarity with the Sermon on the Mount often obscures its most wondrous element. There is no question that the first listeners heard it correctly: Jesus teaches with authority and not like the scribes. They were amazed at this (Matthew 7:29). They even remained talking about it later: "What thing is this — what new doctrine is this?" (Mark 1:27). The harmony of Jesus' teach-

ing was obviously in another key. The scribes appealed to the laws of Moses and the prophets to support their assertions. Only the Lord God has authority. Men can only repeat things. For that reason the scribes give their instruction in a tone of submission. Doubly striking is that Jesus does not appear as an expositor of the Bible in the Sermon on the Mount: there are hardly any references to the Old Testament. Jesus talks as if He Himself is the giver of law. Quite characteristic is His statement: "But I tell you." In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus Himself is speaking: "Verily I say unto you." He commands and the people are bound to His commandments. Apparently the Creator, the LORD Himself, is standing in front of the disciples, not a man from Nazareth.

This tone belongs to the revelation in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus lets the crowds from Israel know who He is. His miracles already pointed in a definite direction. Now He is also speaking without reservation in the manner of God the Law-Giver. Faith-experience must become obedience because Jesus is nobody less than God's own Son, who became man. The mystery behind this authority is the mystery behind Jesus' person.

The Sermon on the Mount is full of commandments because the person delivering it is the one Master to whom every mortal being is subjected, even in Israel. Faith has become a neutral affair for many in the 20th Century. This, in turn, stems from the 19th Century's rejection of belief in Jesus' conception by the Holy Spirit as well as any belief in Jesus' divinity. Why should the teaching of a fellow human being from Palestine have any more authority than other doctrines present in the world? The opposite, however, applies as well: whoever recognizes Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, understands that faith in this Jesus cannot be neutral. It demands submission. The tone of the Sermon on the Mount reveals the voice of the Good Shepherd. The Shepherd has authority because He is the master and gives His life for the sheep. Now we have to follow, regardless how narrow the way He leads may be.

The enduring Sermon on the Mount

The mountain towards which Jesus led the crowds is now deserted. The speech delivered there at the beginning of Jesus'

earthly ministry remains among us. Matthew and Luke have preserved its major elements in their Gospels, and not as a report of something that happened once in the past but as the rendering of what Jesus asks of all kinds of people during all ages. The sermon has permanent validity.

Its validity has been watered down in many ways. The commandments of the Sermon on the Mount are only supposed to apply in a millennial kingdom yet to come. Or, they are not applicable to all people, but only to those who cherish lofty ideals. Or, they are really only intended to let us see how imperfect we all are. In this way the Sermon on the Mount becomes a museum piece for the church rather than a marching order for today.

There are certainly enough indications to maintain that Jesus' teaching is also applicable for later periods. The whole sermon is set in an unconditional tone and formulated as broadly as possible. Later in the Gospels we find parts of the instruction just as they are given in the Sermon on the Mount: it is constantly repeated and impressed upon the reader. After His resurrection Jesus called the disciples to the mountain where He had given His commandments and He commissioned them to make disciples of all nations and to teach them to obey everything which He had said (Matthew 28:16-20). Apparently the question what Jesus had actually commanded His disciples was closed at the end of Matthew's Gospel. He had written it down earlier in the book and, in particular, in the Sermon on the Mount. As well, we should not be surprised to discover that James' Epistle is soaked into the Sermon on the Mount and that the author sometimes quotes it word for word in order to keep the church on the right path.

The Sermon on the Mount has always remained popular, at least some parts of it. Certain sections are eagerly employed to support disarmament and oppose nuclear weapons, to support aid for the Third World and to oppose the capitalist system. We shall yet see to what extent the Sermon on the Mount really does provide pointers in this direction. However, beginning a political or social debate on the basis of one or two texts from the Sermon on the Mount is senseless without first recognizing that the whole Sermon has authority over us and demands our obedience. We cannot reject the faith and then turn around and use texts from the Sermon on the Mount as slogans at a demonstration.

Listening to this teaching is something quite different than plucking out quotes.

The Sermon on the Mount has not been given in order to spruce up our ideals. Having received it, we must subject our whole life to it. Jesus compares the man who hears and obeys these words with someone who builds his house on a rock. The choice of the building site was not free: it had to be this foundation. A person may intend to erect a home for his fellow man even though he builds outside it. But the flood rains will wash it away because the house is built upon sand.

Anyone beginning with life, building a house, has to start with listening and obeying. It's possible: God's only Son has come in order to show us the way. Believing is obeying, but obeying is also believing: believing in the Good Shepherd.