

St. John Henry Newman

The Ventures of Faith

“They said to Him, ‘We are able.’” These words of the holy Apostles James and John were in reply to a very solemn question addressed to them by their Divine Master. They coveted, with a noble ambition, though as yet unpracticed in the highest wisdom, untaught in the holiest truth—they coveted to sit beside Him on His Throne of Glory. They would be content with nothing short of that special gift which He had come to grant to His elect, which He shortly after died to purchase for them, and which He offers to us. They ask the gift of eternal life; and He in answer told them, not that they should have it (though for them it was really reserved), but He reminded them what they must venture for it; “Are you able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They said unto Him, ‘We are able.’” Here then a great lesson is impressed upon us, that our duty as Christians lies in this, in making ventures for eternal life without the absolute certainty of success.

Success and reward everlasting they will have, who persevere unto the end. Doubt we cannot, that the ventures of all Christ's servants must be returned to them at the Last Day with abundant increase. This is a true saying—He returns far more than we lend to Him, and without fail. But I am speaking of individuals, of ourselves one by one. No one among us knows for certain that he himself will persevere; yet every one among us, to give himself even a chance of success at all, must make a venture. As regards individuals, then, it is quite true, that all of us must for certain make ventures for heaven, yet without the certainty of success through them. This, indeed, is the very meaning of the word “venture;” for that is a strange venture which has nothing in it of fear, risk, danger, anxiety, uncertainty. Yes; so it certainly is; and in this consists the excellence and nobleness of faith; this is the very reason why faith is singled out from other graces, and honored as the especial means of our justification, because its presence implies that we have the heart to make a venture.

St. Paul sufficiently sets this before us in the eleventh chapter of his Letter to the Hebrews, which opens with a definition of faith, and after that, gives us examples of it, as if to guard against any possibility of mistake. After quoting the text, “the just shall live by faith,” and thereby showing clearly that he is speaking of what he treats in his Letter to the Romans as justifying faith, he continues, “Now faith is the substance,” that is, the realizing, “of things hoped for, the evidence,” that is, the ground of proof, “of things not seen.” It is in its very essence the making present of what is unseen; the acting upon the mere prospect of it, as if it really were possessed; the venturing upon it, the staking present ease, happiness, or other good, upon the chance of the future. And hence in another letter he says pointedly, “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.” (1 Cor. 15:19) If the dead are not raised, we have indeed made a most signal miscalculation in the choice of life, and are altogether at fault. And what is true of the main doctrine itself, is true also of our individual interest in it. This he shows us in his Letter to the Hebrews, by the instance of the Ancient Saints, who thus risked their present happiness on the chance of future. Abraham “went out, not knowing where he went.” He and the rest died “not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.” Such was the faith of the Patriarchs: and in the text the youthful Apostles, with an untaught but generous simplicity, lay claim to the same. Little as they knew what they said in its fullness, yet their words were any how expressive of their hidden hearts, prophetic of their future conduct. They said unto Him, “We are able.” They pledge themselves as if unawares, and are caught by One mightier than they, and, as it were, craftily made captive. But, in truth, their unsuspecting pledge was, after all, heartily made, though they knew not what they promised; and so was accepted. “Are you able to drink of My cup, and be baptized with My baptism?” They said to Him, “We are able.” He in answer, without promising them heaven, graciously said, “You shall drink indeed of My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with.”

Our Lord appears to act after the same manner towards St. Peter: He accepted his offer of service, yet warned him how little he himself understood it. The zealous Apostle wished to follow his Lord at once: but He answered, "Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward." (John 13:36) At another time, He claimed the promise already made to Him; He said, "Follow Me;" and at the same time explained it, "Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you, and carry you where you do not want to go." (John 21:18-22)

Such were the ventures made in faith, and in uncertainty, by the Apostles. Our Savior, in a passage of St. Luke's Gospel, binds upon us all the necessity of deliberately doing the like—"Which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it, begin to mock him, saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish." And then He presently adds, "So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be My disciple:" (Luke 14:28-33) thus warning us of the full sacrifice we must make. We give up our all to Him; and He is to claim this or that, or grant us somewhat of it for a season, according to His good pleasure. On the other hand, the case of the rich young man, who went away sorrowful, when our Lord bade him give up his all and follow Him, is an instance of one who had not faith to make the venture of this world for the next, upon His word.

If then faith be the essence of a Christian life, and if it be what I have now described, it follows that our duty lies in risking upon Christ's word what we have, for what we have not; and doing so in a noble, generous way, not indeed rashly or lightly, still without knowing accurately what we are doing, not knowing either what we give up, nor again what we shall gain; uncertain about our reward, uncertain about our extent of sacrifice, in all respects leaning, waiting upon Him, trusting in Him to fulfil His promise, trusting in Him to enable us to fulfil our own vows, and so in all respects proceeding without carefulness or anxiety about the future.

Now I dare say that what I have said as yet seems plain and unexceptionable to most of those who hear me; yet surely, when I proceed to draw the practical inference which immediately follows, there are those who in their secret hearts, if not in open avowal, will draw back. Men allow us Ministers of Christ to proceed in our preaching, while we confine ourselves to general truths, until they see that they themselves are implicated in them, and have to act upon them; and then they suddenly come to a stand; they collect themselves and draw back, and say, “They do not see this—or do not admit that”—and though they are quite unable to say why that should not follow from what they already allow, which we show must follow, still they persist in saying, that they do not see that it does follow; and they look about for excuses, and they say we carry things too far, that we are extravagant, and that we ought to limit and modify what we say, that we do not take into account times, and seasons, and the like. This is what they pretend; and well has it been said, “where there is a will there is a way;” for there is no truth, however overpoweringly clear, but men may escape from it by shutting their eyes; there is no duty, however urgent, but they may find ten thousand good reasons against it, in their own case. And they are sure to say we carry things too far, when we carry them home to themselves.

This sad infirmity of men, called Christians, is exemplified in the subject immediately before us. Who does not at once admit that faith consists in venturing on Christ’s word without seeing? Yet in spite of this, may it not be seriously questioned, whether men in general, even those of the better sort, venture anything upon His truth at all?

Consider for an instant. Let everyone who hears me ask himself the question, what stake has he in the truth of Christ’s promise? How would he be a whit the worse off, supposing (which is impossible), but, supposing it to fail? We know what it is to have a stake in any venture of this world. We venture our property in plans which promise a return; in plans which we trust, which we have faith in. What have we ventured for Christ? What have we given to Him on a belief of His promise? The Apostle said, that he and his brethren would be

of all men most miserable, if the dead were not raised. Can we in any degree apply this to ourselves? We think, perhaps, at present, we have some hope of heaven; well, this we should lose of course; but after all, how should we be worse off as to our present condition? A trader, who has embarked some property in a speculation which fails, not only loses his prospect of gain, but somewhat of his own, which he ventured with the hope of gain. This is the question, What have we ventured? I really fear, when we come to examine, it will be found that there is nothing we resolve, nothing we do, nothing we do not do, nothing we avoid, nothing we choose, nothing we give up, nothing we pursue, which we should not resolve, and do, and not do, and avoid, and choose, and give up, and pursue, if Christ had not died, and if heaven were not promised us. I really fear that most men called Christians, whatever they may profess, whatever they may think they feel, whatever warmth and illumination and love they may claim as their own, yet would go on almost as they do, neither much better nor much worse, if they believed Christianity to be a fable. When young, they indulge their lusts, or at least pursue the world's vanities; as time goes on, they get into a fair way of business, or other mode of making money; then they marry and settle; and their interest coinciding with their duty, they seem to be, and think themselves, respectable and religious men; they grow attached to things as they are; they begin to have a zeal against vice and error; and they follow after peace with all men. Such conduct indeed, as far as it goes, is right and praiseworthy. Only I say, it has not necessarily anything to do with religion at all; there is nothing in it which is any proof of the presence of religious principle in those who adopt it; there is nothing they would not do still, though they had nothing to gain from it, except what they gain from it now: they do gain something now, they do gratify their present wishes, they are quiet and orderly, because it is their interest and taste to be so; but they venture nothing, they risk, they sacrifice, they abandon nothing on the faith of Christ's word.

For instance: St. Barnabas had a property in Cyprus; he gave it up for the poor of Christ. Here is an intelligible sacrifice. He did something he would not have done, unless the Gospel were true. It is plain, if the Gospel turned out a fable (which God forbid), but if so, he would have taken his line most unskillfully; he would be in a great mistake, and would have suffered a loss. He would be like a merchant whose vessels were wrecked, or whose correspondents had failed. Man has confidence in man, he trusts to the credit of his

neighbor; but Christians do not risk largely upon their Savior's word; and this is the one thing they have to do. Christ tells us Himself, "Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth; so that, when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings;" (Luke 16:9), that is, buy an interest in the next world with that wealth which this world uses unrighteously; feed the hungry, clothe the naked, relieve the sick, and it shall turn to "moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail." (Luke 12:33) Thus almsdeeds, I say, are an intelligible venture and an evidence of faith.

So again the man who, when his prospects in the world are good, gives up the promise of wealth or of eminence, in order to be nearer Christ, to have a place in His temple, to have more opportunity for prayer and praise, he makes a sacrifice.

Or he who, from a noble striving after perfection, puts off the desire for worldly comforts, and is, like Daniel or St. Paul, in much labor and business, yet with a solitary heart, he too ventures something upon the certainty of the world to come.

Or he who, after falling into sin, repents in deed as well as in word; puts some yoke upon his shoulder; subjects himself to punishment; is severe upon his flesh; denies himself innocent pleasures; or puts himself to public shame—he too shows that his faith is the realizing of things hoped for, the warrant of things not seen.

Or again: he who only gets himself to pray against those things which the many seek after, and to embrace what the heart naturally shrinks from; he who, when God's will seems to tend towards worldly ill, while he deprecates it, yet prevails on himself to say heartily, "Thy will be done;" he, even, is not without his sacrifice.

Or he who, being in prospect of wealth, honestly prays God that he may never be rich; or he who is in prospect of station, and earnestly prays that he may never have it; or he who has friends or kindred, and acquiesces with an entire heart in their removal while it is yet doubtful, who can say, "Take them away, if it be your will, to you I give them up, to you I commit them," who is willing to be taken at his word; he too risks somewhat, and is accepted.

Such a one is taken at his word, while he understands not, perhaps, what he says; but he is accepted, as meaning somewhat, and risking much. Generous hearts, like James and John, or Peter, often speak largely and confidently beforehand of what they will do for Christ, not insincerely, yet ignorantly; and for their sincerity's sake they are taken at their word as a reward, though they have yet to learn how serious that word is. "They said to Him, We are able;"—and the vow is recorded in heaven. This is the case of all of us at many seasons. First, at Confirmation; when we promise what was promised for us at Baptism, yet without being able to understand how much we promise, but rather trusting to God gradually to reveal it, and to give us strength according to our day. So again they who enter Holy Orders promise they know not what, engage themselves they know not how deeply, debar themselves of the world's ways they know not how intimately, find perchance they must cut off from them the right hand, sacrifice the desire of their eyes and the stirring of their hearts at the foot of the Cross, while they thought, in their simplicity, they were but choosing the quiet easy life of "plain men dwelling in tents." And so again, in various ways, the circumstances of the times cause men at certain seasons to take this path or that, for religion's sake. They know not whither they are being carried; they see not the end of their course; they know no more than this, that it is right to do what they are now doing; and they hear a whisper within them, which assures them, as it did the two holy brothers, that whatever their present conduct involves in time to come, they shall, through God's grace, be equal to it. Those blessed Apostles said, "We are able;" and in truth they were enabled to do and suffer as they had said. St. James was given strength to be steadfast unto death, the death of martyrdom; being slain with the sword in Jerusalem. St. John, his brother, had still more to bear, dying last of the Apostles, as St. James first. He had to bear bereavement, first, of his brother, then of the other Apostles. He had to bear a length of years in loneliness, exile, and weakness. He had to experience the dreariness of being solitary, when those whom he had loved had been summoned away. He had to live in his own thoughts, without familiar friend, with those only about him who belonged to a younger generation. Of him were demanded by his gracious Lord, as pledges of his faith, all his eye loved and his heart held converse with. He was as a man moving his goods into a far country, who at intervals and by portions sends them before him, till his present abode is well-nigh

unfurnished. He sent forward his friends on their journey, while he stayed himself behind, that there might be those in heaven to have thoughts of him, to look out for him, and receive him when his Lord should call. He sent before him, also, other still more voluntary pledges and ventures of his faith—a self-denying walk, a zealous maintenance of the truth, fasting and prayers, labors of love, a virgin life, buffetings from the heathen, persecution, and banishment. Well might so great a Saint say, at the end of his days “Come, Lord Jesus!” as those who are weary of the night, and wait for the morning. All his thoughts, all his contemplations, desires, and hopes, were stored in the invisible world; and death, when it came, brought back to him the sight of what he had worshipped, what he had loved, what he had conversed with, in years long past away. Then, when again brought into the presence of what he had lost, how would remembrance revive, and familiar thoughts long buried come to life! Who shall dare to describe the blessedness of those who find all their pledges safe returned to them, all their ventures abundantly and beyond measure satisfied?

Alas! that we, my brethren, have not more of this high and unearthly spirit! How is it that we are so contented with things as they are—that we are so willing to be let alone, and to enjoy this life—that we make such excuses, if any one presses on us the necessity of something higher, the duty of bearing the Cross, if we would earn the Crown, of the Lord Jesus Christ?

I repeat it; what are our ventures and risks upon the truth of His word? for He says expressly, “Every one who has forsaken houses, or brothers or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for My Name’s sake, shall receive a hundred-fold, and shall inherit everlasting life. But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.” (Matt. 19: 29, 30)

Watching

Our Savior gave this warning when he was leaving this world, leaving it, that is, as far as his visible presence is concerned. He looked forward to the many hundred years which were to pass before he came again. He foresaw the state of the world and the Church, as we see it this day, when his prolonged absence

had made it practically thought, that he never will come back in visible presence, and he mercifully whispers into our ears, not to trust in what we see, not to share in that general unbelief, not to be carried away by the world, but to “take heed, watch, and pray” (Mk 13:33), and look out for his coming.

Let us then consider this most serious question, which concerns every one of us so nearly: what is it to watch for Christ?

He watches for Christ who has a sensitive, eager, apprehensive mind; who is awake, alive, quick-sighted, zealous in seeking and honoring him; who looks out for him in all that happens, and who would not be surprised, who would not be over-agitated or overwhelmed, if he found that he was coming at once.

And he watches with Christ, who, while he looks on to the future, looks back on the past, and does not so contemplate what his Savior has purchased for him, as to forget what he has suffered for him. He watches with Christ, whoever commemorates and renews in his own person Christ’s cross and agony, and gladly takes up that mantle of affliction which Christ wore here, and left behind him when he ascended. And hence in the epistles, often as the inspired writers show their desire for his second coming, as often do they show their memory of his first, and never lose sight of his crucifixion in his resurrection. Thus if St. Paul reminds the Romans that they wait for “the redemption of our bodies” (Rom 8:23) at the Last Day, he also says, “provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom 8:17). If he speaks to the Corinthians of waiting for “the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:7), he also speaks of “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made manifested in our bodies” (2 Cor 4:10). If to the Philippians of “the power of his resurrection,” he adds at once his prayer that he “may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” (Phil 3:10). If he consoles the Colossians with the hope that “when Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (Col 3:4), he has already declared that he is completing “what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church” (Col 1:24). Thus, the thought of what Christ is must not obliterate from the mind the thought of what he was; and faith is always sorrowing with him while it rejoices. And the same union of opposite thoughts is impressed on us in Holy Communion, in which we see Christ’s death and resurrection together, at

one and the same time; we commemorate the one, we rejoice in the other. We make an offering, and we gain a blessing.

This then is to watch: to be detached from what is present, and to live in what is unseen; to live in the thought of Christ as he came once, and as he will come again; to desire his second coming, from our affectionate and grateful remembrance of his first. And this it is, in which we shall find that men in general are wanting. They are indeed without faith and love also, but at least they profess to have these graces, nor is it easy to convince them that they have not. For they consider they have faith, if they do but own that the Bible came from God, or that they trust wholly in Christ for salvation; and they consider they have love if they obey some of the most obvious of God's commandments. Love and faith they think they have; but surely they do not even fancy that they watch. What is meant by watching, and how it is a duty, they have no definite idea; and thus it accidentally happens that watching is a suitable test of a Christian, in that it is that particular property of faith and love, which is the life or energy of faith and love, the way in which faith and love, if genuine, show themselves.

Year passes after year silently. Christ's coming is ever nearer than it was. O that, as he comes nearer earth, we may approach nearer heaven! O, my brethren, pray him to give you the heart to seek him in sincerity. Pray him to make you in earnest. You have one work only, to bear your cross after him. Resolve in his strength to do it. Resolve to be no longer beguiled by shadows of religion, or by words, or by disputings, or by notions, or by high professions, or by excuses, or by the world's promises or threats. Pray him to give you what Scripture calls "an honest and good heart" (Lk 8:15) or "a whole heart" (1 Chron 29:9), and, without waiting, begin at once to obey him with the best heart you have. Any obedience is better than none; any profession which is disjoined from obedience is a mere pretense and deceit. Any religion which does not bring you nearer to God is of the world. You have to seek his face; obedience is the only way of seeking him. All your duties are obediences. If you are to believe the truths he has revealed, to regulate yourselves by his precepts, to be frequent in his ordinances, to adhere to his Church and people, why is it, except because he has bid you? And to do what he bids is to obey him, and to obey him is to approach him. Every act of obedience is an approach, an approach to him who is not far off, though he seems so, but close behind this

visible screen of things which hides him from us. He is behind this material framework; earth and sky are but a veil going between him and us. The day will come when he will rend that veil and show himself to us. And then, according as we have waited for him, will he recompense us. If we have forgotten him, he will not know us, but “blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes... he will put on his apron and have them sit at table, and he will come and serve them. If he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them so, blessed are those servants!” (Lk 12:37-38) May this be the portion of every one of us! It is hard to attain it, but it is woeful to fail. Life is short. Death is certain. The world to come is everlasting.

Christ Hidden from the World

Of all the thoughts which rise in the mind when contemplating the sojourn of our Lord Jesus Christ upon earth, none perhaps is more affecting and subduing than the obscurity which attended it. I do not mean his obscure condition in the sense of its being humble, but the obscurity in which he was shrouded, and the secrecy which he observed. This characteristic of his first advent is referred to very frequently in Scripture, as in “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (Jn 1:5), and is in contrast with what is foretold about his second advent. Then “every eye will see him” (Rev 1:7), which implies that all shall recognize him. Whereas, when he came for the first time, though many saw him, few indeed discerned him. It had been prophesied, “he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him” (Is 53:2), and at the very end of his ministry, he said to one of his twelve chosen friends, “Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip?” (Jn 14:9)

His condescension in coming down from heaven, in leaving his Father's glory and taking flesh, is so far beyond the power of words or thought that one might consider at first sight that it mattered little whether he came as a prince or a beggar. And yet after all, it *is* much more wonderful that he came in low estate, for this reason: because it might have been thought beforehand that, though he condescended to come on earth, yet he would not submit to be overlooked and despised. Now, the rich are not despised by the world, and the poor are. If he had come as a great prince or noble, the world without knowing a whit more that he was God, yet would at least have looked up to him and honored him as being a prince. But when he came in low estate, he took upon him one additional humiliation—contempt—being ignored, scorned, rudely passed by, roughly profaned by his creatures.

What were the actual circumstances of his coming? His mother is a poor woman. She comes to Bethlehem to be taxed, traveling, when her choice would have been to remain at home. She finds there is no room in the inn. She is obliged to betake herself to a stable. She brings forth her firstborn Son and lays him in a manger. That little babe, so born, so placed, is none other than the Creator of heaven and earth, the eternal Son of God.

But you may say, how does this concern us? Christ is not here; we cannot in any way insult his majesty. Are we so sure of this? Let it be considered that Christ is still on earth. He said expressly that he would come again. The Holy Spirit's coming is so really his coming, that we might as well say that he was not here in the days of flesh, when he was visibly in the world, as deny that he is here now, when he is here by his divine Spirit. This indeed is a mystery, how God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, two Persons, can be one, how he can be in the Spirit and the Spirit in him, but so it is.

If he is still on earth, yet is not visible (which cannot be denied), it is plain that he keeps himself still in the condition which he chose in the days of his flesh. I mean, he is a hidden Savior, and may be approached (unless we are careful) without due reverence and fear. I say, wherever he is (for that is a further question), still he is here, and again he is secret, and whatever be the tokens of his presence, still they must be of a nature to admit of persons doubting where it is.

When we consider what the tokens of his presence now are, they will be found to be of a nature easily to lead men into irreverence unless they be humble and watchful. For instance, the Church is called his body. What his material body was when he was visible on earth, such is the Church now. It is the instrument of his divine power. It is that which we must approach to gain good from him. It is that which by insulting we awaken his anger. Now, what is the Church but, as it were, a body of humiliation, almost provoking insult and profaneness, when men do not live by faith? An earthen vessel, far more so even than his body of flesh, for that was at least pure from all sin, and the Church is defiled in all her members.

Again, he has made the poor, weak, and afflicted tokens and instruments of his presence, and here again it is plain the same temptation meets us to neglect or profane it. What he was, such are his chosen followers in this world. And as his obscure and defenseless state led men to insult and ill-treat him, so the like peculiarities, in the tokens of his presence, lead men to insult him now. He forewarns us that at the Last Day he will say to the righteous, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me" (Mt 25:35-36). And he adds, "as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40). In every age, then, Christ is both in the world, and yet not publicly so more than in the days of his flesh.

And a similar remark applies to his ordinances, which are at once most simple, yet most intimately connected with him. St. Paul, in his first epistle to the Corinthians, shows both how easy and how fearful it is to profane the Lord's Supper while he states how great the excess of the Corinthians had been, yet also that it was a failure to discern the Lord's body (1 Cor 11:29). When he was born into the world, the world knew it not. He was laid in a rude manger among the cattle, but "all God's angels" worshipped him (Heb 1:6). Now too he is present upon a table, homely perhaps in make, and dishonored in its circumstances, and faith adores, but the world passes by.

Let us then pray him ever to enlighten the eye of our understanding, that we may belong to the heavenly host, not to this world. As the carnal-minded would not perceive him even in heaven, so the spiritual heart may approach him, possess him, see him, even upon earth.